



# 氷結鏡界

7

空白洗礼

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ファンタジア文庫



# Hyouketsu Kyoukai no Eden

## vol.7 - Blank Baptism

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A note going into this volume, Blank in the volume title is written the same as Igun'I. In the afterword, it was written as 空白の洗礼 which is literally “blank’s baptism”. I translated it as Igun'I back there seeing as there’s nothing known as “blank” other than him who can possibly use baptism. Might be worth keeping in mind though.



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空白洗札

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氷結鏡界のエデン7

空白洗札

「世界を構成する鍵。空白のこと、あなたの魔笛のこと、第七真音律のこと。全てを教えてあげる。望む事実も、望まない事実も」

満面の笑みを浮かべ、空白は歌うようにシェルティスに告げた。

「あなたには全てを知って——絶望して欲しいですからね」

第三機関・異篇卿の拠点に潜入したシェルティスの前に、異篇卿・イグニドが現れる。空白の存在にふしぎな郷愁に襲われ、シェルティスは戸惑いを隠せないでいた。そして同じ頃。千年師・レオンの前には、“理想の敵”が立ちふさがる——。

穢歌の庭に堕ちたシェルティスの“真実”が明かされ、“みえざるもの”の存在証明が求められる、重層世界ファンタジー。





I am Iguna'd.

A colorless color, the color of a completely forgotten past. A vacant post which should not exist.

Wait there; I will pursue you this time. *[T/N: "there" written as "ideal".]*





“It seems that I’ve fallen in love with him.”

“Stop……only that, please……no!”

“If you let me scorch you with my flames, I’ll think about it.”

“This is the ‘*Chief World Project’s*’ beginning.”

“The beginning and the plan’s most important point.”

# Prologue - Pursued Goal

Weapons.

At the same time that the morning sun illuminated the horizon, that started.

Great swords comparable to their own heights readied with both hands, the two boys ran at the same time.

Their footfalls which created sand clouds accelerated them. Their momentum reached the peak already at the second step and they spun their bodies sideways like a whirlwind, brandishing their great swords horizontally across.

That was not simply physical strength. Shifting the centre of gravity to one's feet and knees, spinning motions utilizing the waist to the shoulders and centrifugal force from the shoulders to the arms — all of it was housed in single strike upon the sword edge.

Claangggggg!

A short but sharp sound tore through the air and echoed. Great sword clashed head-on against great sword and the resulting recoil blew the two boys backwards.

".....!"

A little breath leaked out.

Adjusting the sword tips which were flowing backwards from the impact, they once again swung at the same time. Silver flash overlapped with silver flash and the sound of swords clashing rang out once more.

One after another, the endlessly continuing weapons and interlocking of swords knew no end. Ten times between twenty, twenty became fifty, fifty became a hundred and still there was no end in sight.

Then—

The morning sun which painted the sky blue had at some point changed to an evening sun which painted it red.

Crunch.....



The great sword sank about halfway into the ground.

Letting go of its grip, one boy fell backwards while facing the sky.

"....."

The boy looked at the sky with eyes which clearly showed fatigue. His dazzling blond hair had become covered in dirt and his simple training shirt had countless rips cut into it.

"....."

In an absentminded state, he only continued to breathe loudly.

And.

"Done?"

The figure of a person looked down at that boy.

"If you're done, say you're done and then fall over. I thought it was a trap and was about to attack you."

The boy looking down suddenly lifted the corners of his mouth.

Everywhere along his forehead and nape was flowing with sweat like a waterfall, but there was not a scratch upon his shirt. Despite having fought that harsh of a battle from dawn to dusk.

".....is.....da.....!"

The collapsed boy murmured.

"What was that?"

".....This damn brother....."

**[T/N: The word used is "aniki". Fairly lacking in respect.]**

"Silence."

The silver-haired boy kicked the fallen boy's head without mercy and smiled intrepidly.

The collapsed side and the side looking down — both had silver hair, blue eyes and sharp and graceful features. They were boys in their early teens but with a tall body close to that of an adult in height.

".....Why.....are you stronger.....?"

The younger brother clenched his molars and leaked that out.

"Because.....even though you were only born a little earlier.....than me."

Yes, his birth was only slightly earlier.

Even so, what was this difference?

No matter how many times he challenged him, no matter how much special training he did, he could not close this gap in skill. And in the end, his desperation attack had ended with these results.

"Do you think there's an older brother who would lose to his younger brother in this world?"



The older brother wiped his trickling waterfall of sweat.

".....I don't ge-t it. There are tons of those."

"That's true. I just felt like saying it."

"You.....damn older aniki."

Spurring on his body which was exhausted all over, he barely managed to raise his upper body and sit cross-legged.

"Want to keep going?"

".....I'll let you off for today."

"Cheeky. That's not a line for the shamed side to say."

His head was knocked.

"I'll get going now too. I have to hurry or I'll get yelled at by the captain."





".....Even though you'll get drilled about when you returned."

Rising up in the center of the floating continent, Orbie Clar, the tower which connected to the heavens — '

*Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>'.*

His older brother was working as a Guard of the tower but he would sneak away unnoticed by his superior like this and come to the Living District, then accompany him for his training like this. At those times, it seemed that he would be scolded for leaving without permission.

"Yeah, that. ....I wonder if it'll be especially harsh this time? Since I was told to behave myself because the promotion exam is coming up soon."

"Sennenshi?"

"Too early for that. I'm still a Regular Guard. Next is an Elite Guard and after that, a Senneshi. Well, I can probably do it."

".....You're saying that lightly."

The most powerful bodyguards of which each of the five Priestesses had only one, '

*Sennenshi*

'. Even throughout the floating continent <Orbie Clar>, they were accomplished martial artists whom you could count on one hand. Swordplay, hand-to-hand combat, gun handling, spear techniques: they were individuals who had reached their respective territories in which they were unmatched by any on the floating continent <Orbie Clar>.

"Because if you talk about Sennenshi....."

"It's nothing special. It's the same as having already become one."

It was his older brother's habit. He would easily speak of difficult accomplishments.

"—Leon."

"Mm."

Having his name suddenly called, he blinked.

"It should be fine around now; I don't mind if you enter Tenketsu Palace

<Sophia>. I'll permit it."

"Really!?"

It was a dream he'd had for forever.

He wanted to be part of the same group as his older brother and become a Guard and perform the duties like his older brother.

"Well, if you're this strong, you should be able to handle the Instructor's grueling training."

".....Watch me, I'll catch up to you in an instant."

"A Regular Guard? By the time you become a Regular Guard, I'll have been at the summit of the tower long ago."

"Sennenshi?"

"Those are the partners of the five Priestesses. There's already a class in the Guards one level "



above'."

Suu — his older brother pointed his index finger to the skies.

*"Master of Heaven*

'. There is only one within the tower: the partner of the Queen."

".....Ahh, that."

Hearing his brother's proclamation that he'd gotten used to, Leon didn't even feel like hiding his wry smile.

—Even though it's unknown whether that really exists or not.

It was of the same rank as the Queen who was master of the tower, thus '  
*Master of Heaven*

'. At any rate, it was a class of which nobody had been publicly promoted to. There should be nobody there but it was certain that the class was prepared in Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>'s central computer.

"Aniki really likes those kinds of things."

"It's not fun if there's nothing to aim for; it feels like you'll forget to work your hardest without a goal."

Shouldering his great sword, his older brother turned his back to him.

.....Even though our heights should also be exactly the same.

.....Somehow, my older brother's back as he walks towards the sun looks really large.

Time flowed from there—

Unnoticed, the younger brother's age became the same as his older brother's and surpassed it.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, floor 273, the Sennenshi-only floor.

".....Leon."

"Mm?"

The area around his elbow was jiggled and Leon opened his eyes halfway.

".....Are you okay?"

The one looking worriedly at him was a young girl in a kimono-styled vestment.

Syun-rei Pia Nucclene — the fourth Priestess for whom he was the partner. She was a talented girl who had become a Priestess at the tender age of sixteen.

".....Your meditation was taking longer than usual."

".....Ahh."

Remembering that he had been indulging in reminiscence, he smiled wryly.



"Sorry, I was just thinking about something."

"—Okay."

The Priestess said only that and smiled, looking relieved from the bottom of her heart.

Though a young and frail girl, she was supporting the barrier which protects the floating continent <Orbie Clar>. It was for that exact reason that the Sennenshi were to protect them.

"Time to reconsider."

Having a Priestess look out for a Sennenshi was defeating the point.

.....Moreover.

.....I wouldn't be able to face him like this.

Standing up wordlessly, he looked down at the floor which had been polished almost like a mirror.

A shockproof board colored a rusty blue. It was not just the floor but also the walls and ceiling. There were also heat-resistant, shockproof metal plates everywhere on this training floor.

Move away. He signaled that to Syun-rei with his eyes and he took a step away from her in the himself.

"\_\_"

He gripped the great sword which had a twofold structured hilt. The non-standard great sword which surpassed an adult in height was a personal sword tailored precisely for Leon's physique and muscular strength.

He swung that sword up and down.

With all his strength.

With the intention of copying his older brother's sword from that time.

"....."

The sword whipped up a whirlwind while shining. Leaving behind the sound and air, just single-mindedly sword strikes devoid of distraction.

But—

"Leon?"

".....It's far."

In front of Syun-rei who tilted her head, Leon put on a thin wry smile.

It's still far.

Rather than far, the gap has widened even more since then.

"

It's not fun if there's nothing to aim for; it feels like you'll forget to work your hardest without a goal.

"

.....A goal.

.....My lifelong goal will always be him, huh.

No matter how much he raised his skill, the older brother in his memories would definitely be one step ahead. Maybe memories were like that: the more time passed, the more they would be idealized, and he could not compare now.

His older brother was no longer here.

He took a hit from a wyvern's claws to the head in protecting his unit comrades and fell into a distant valley like that — in the end, he did not return no matter how long they waited.

.....I wonder when I will surpass you.

His older brother's distant back.

With frustration, anger, disappointment, and above all, with aspiration, did he gaze at that back.

".....Okay."

Pouring strength into the great sword's handle, Leon stared fixedly at the ceiling.

At the point which was beyond the ceiling, at the summit of the tower.

"Wait there, I'll chase after you this time."

**[T/N: "there" is written as "ideal".]**

Four days later.

Leon once again remembered that vow.



# Chapter 1 - The Separated

## Part 1

.....It was quiet.

It was silent to the point of hurting the ears. A snowy mountain in the dead of winter which hid the breathing of all living creatures or possibly the complete opposite, hot sand at the height of summer.

It was silence which reminded one of those kinds of harsh examples from nature.

"....."

However,  
**this**  
was not that kind of large natural environment but the very different middle of the Living Districts.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, floor 269.

The tower which stood at the center of the floating continent, Orbie Clar, on a floor near the summit. Normally, it would be used by the executives of the tower for their meetings.

"Hey, hey, Sheltis? Come on, let's go tooooo."

"....."

"

Hey! Everyone's left and it's just usss. It's boring with just us left in the meeting rooom.

"

".....Mm."

"Oh?"

"You're right, let's go. We also have to make preparations."

Left all alone in the room, Sheltis looked towards the ceiling light and sighed.

—Both his hands had been balled.

Opening his sweaty hands, he supported himself with the round table and stood from his chair.

"

That's unexpected; I expected you to be jumping for joy.

"

".....I'm not a dog."

Shrugging in response to machine crystal <Ilis> which was blinking at his chest, he moved towards the room's door.

Meeting room 269-D. He pushed open the door labeled as such.

.....I can't celebrate yet.

.....That will have to wait until I know if Igun'I knows how to purify my mateki.

Holding his breath, he forced back all the cramp-like tension throughout his body. Passing through the door of the empty meeting room, Sheltis went

through the empty hallway and to the elevator.

Yes.

Everything was but a short while before.

## **Part 2**

Meeting room 269-F.

One of the dozens of meeting rooms on floor 269 of the tower—

"Well then, I'll announce the members who will be participating in the joint operation with the Governmental Sector—"

Meimel declared in her usual drawn-out voice. With that, the members filling the room had tension clear on their lips.

—The operation to infiltrate the third organization's headquarters.

"Oh, you're choosing already. That's great, it helps us out too. Riiight, Kuro?"

".....Yes."

The Number Nine <Huick> reclining in his chair and his accompanying female subordinate. To begin with, the chance for this plan was a proposition from the two executives who had come from the Governmental Sector.

The Lords of Unusual Books had once assaulted a Regular Guard unit of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> and even attacked the Governmental Sector only some days ago. This was to infiltrate their base and ascertain their identity and aim.

.....However.

.....The unit members must be stringently selected for that.

Feeling his throat growing dry from the tension, Sheltis gulped.



At any rate, the opponents which '

*Golden*

' Maha and '

*Blank*

' Igun-I belonged to were of unknown strength. Their scale aside, nothing of their objective was known either. Just one thing was known: those who belonged to the group known as the Lords of Unusual Books had monstrous battle potential. Because they were infiltrating the heart of such an enemy, being chosen applied more of a heavy pressure than a sense of accomplishment.

"Say, Kuro, who do you think will be chosen?"

".....Huick-sama, please don't ask such a question in front of the people concerned."

Across from her superior who had his eyes semi-closed happily, Kuro shook her head at them with an exasperated look.

—Those of an absolute level in the tower gathered in the room.

There were three Priestesses. Meimel and Ymy, as well as Viola who was on standby.

There were also three Sennenshi. Ran and Leon, as well as Horn who was on standby. Added to that was the Cadres Guard, Ishtar, who was also idling in the room.

.....And us.

He secretly stole a peek at the comrades from his unit who were standing somewhat to the back of the room.

Mixed in with the distinguished personas was the Cadet Guard unit, which one could go as far as to call unique, consisting of Sheltis, Monica, Vaiei and Kagura. Because of their accomplishments on the Governmental Sector expedition, they had also become candidates for the unit proposed by the Governmental Sector.

"Now then, only those whose names are called may remain."

There was only a maximum of five people who could be chosen.

With the infiltration being a covert operation, these were the select few elite. Only four people could infiltrate at one time — so with the Ninth <Huick> and Kuro being pre-decided members, there were only two who could be chosen for the main unit. The remaining three would form a separate unit.

"Well then."

"Ah—, wait, wait, Meimel. What about those who aren't called? Can they just go back and do whatever? Or will they go on standby?"

Ran's raised hand interrupted Meimel.

"My, my, Ran, you sure like to fret, don't youuu; you don't have to worry about that—"

Facing her partner, the Priestess closed one eye.

"Rather than fretting, I think people would normally be wondering about it. There will be more not picked than picked."

"Yes. But I will call everyone's names so you don't have to worry."

".....Hah?"

"Only those who have their names called may remain here. But I didn't say that means those called are those who will be participating in the infiltration unit—"

Meimel looked at Ran, who had her mouth hanging open, with teasing eyes.

"I was planning to explain after but I guess I'll just say it. I will call everybody's names in order from now, but I will also designate a room at the same time. Everyone, please wait in the room indicated. Those members who will remain in this room as well, it'll be fine with just those who are told to stay here."

"Fumu, fumu. So the different groups, the main unit and the separate unit.....will each receive their own individual instructions from Meimel-sama in their respective rooms?"

Ishtar had a fearless smile on her face which gave no indication as to how she felt.

".....Hm. Did Ishtar say too much?"

"It's no problem〜. Rather, you said what needed to be said."

With no signs of being upset, Meimel also smiled.

"Well then, first — Ymy."

"! Y-Yeshhh!?"

She didn't think her name would come up first, so Ymy gave an inarticulate reply and then had her face dyed bright red.

"Are you okay?"

"I-I'm hine.....I-I'm fine!"

"Yes, yes, settle down a bit. First, you go to the two rooms ahead after exiting to the corridor. Meeting room 269-H. Wait there until I come. Okay, hurry, hurry."

"Y-Yesss!"

Leaving the door open behind her, Ymy ran with small steps.

"Ah—jeez.....she left the door open. She really is bad in tense situations like this. Well, let's continue."

Meimel's gaze moved to the girl reclining in her chair beside her.

"Ran, you stay here."

"Kay, that's easy."

"Now then, let's keep it going. Next, Sheltis."

"....."

"Sheltis Magna Yehle."

"Hey, you're being called."

"—Eh."



Sheltis came back to Earth when Kagura tugged on his sleeve.

"Me?"

"Yes. You will go to meeting room 269-D two rooms over. Wait there."

Using a paper fan she'd pulled out from who-knows-where, she pointed in the direction of the room's right-side wall.

"Understood."

.....I thought I would be called last.

Continuing from a Priestess, Ymy, and a Sennenshi, Ran, the logical progression would be Leon who's also a Sennenshi — it was a sudden switch from the top.

Ymy who had been called first went left in the corridor to meeting room 269-H.

Ran who was second remained in meeting room 269-F.

And he was in meeting room 269-D, two rooms to the right.

.....Everybody's split up so far.

.....I can't predict who will be the chosen members heading to the third organization.

"

Now then, which room will it be? Though it'll be fine even if it's not the main unit, as long as it's the separate one.

"

"It's just waiting now."

It was a miscalculation that his name would be called this quickly. He wouldn't know which rooms everybody who remained would be directed to.

"

The ones you will know are just yourself and those who come to the same meeting room.

"

".....I'm getting nervous."

Wearing a wry smile, Sheltis opened the door to meeting room 269-D.

"My, a teapot and teacup. She's well-prepared."

"So she's saying to drink up and wait."

In accordance with the elongated shape of the room, there was a long table. Atop the nearest table surface, a tea pot with white steam rising from it was prepared.

"It should be Meimel's work. Since the time the Governmental Sector's '*Heaven's Wheel*' came, she must have predicted most of these developments. How fearsome."

"I'll admit that that's some amazing foresight but really, having tea elegantly here is.....uwah, why is there even cookies and cake!? Wait, huh? This cake is——"

"

From The Two Swans <Albireo>. Meimel buys snacks from there sometimes.

"

".....This makes me want to solve the mystery of their connection."

Though they've been prepared, let's set aside the tea and snacks. He chose the table just behind the one with a tea cup on it and sat on a seat at the edge.

"Now we wait to see who will come."

"

You can make a rough estimate based on the members who were called. Oh, speak of the devil.

"

Footsteps were heard from the other side of the door.

"Maybe this should be called an inseparable relationship."

"Leon?"

It was simultaneous.

Sheltis called his name at the same time as the silver-haired young man opened the door and showed himself.

"Welcome, Leon, would you like some tea?"

"I'll pass. Unfortunately, we're not here to fraternize happily."

Leon replied with a serious expression and leaned against the wall.

"You won't sit?"

"This is fine if the talk won't take long. But being together with you, I don't get what's going on."

"

That's rightttt. In the end, is it this group or the remainders that are the selected unit?

"

"Yeah. That Meimel.....just what is she thinking."

Leon's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Sheltis, what do you think?"

"I wonder. Since Leon, you were part of the group that said you 'aren't going', right?"

—Yes.

When Meimel first asked who wanted to be in the chosen unit, in contrast to he who had raised his hand at the start, this man had not raised his hand to the end.

"More accurately, I'm in the 'whatever's fine

' group. If there's a call for it, I won't refuse but I can't apply for it myself because of my position as a Sennenshi."

Leon crossed his arms while still leaning against the wall.

"While Syun-rei is supporting Hyouketsu Kyoukai, a single person can't just run off ahead on this large-scale mission, can he?"

"Ah, that's true. But Meimel would know that for sure."

He who had said he wanted to go and



Leon who remained firm in not raising his hand to the end. As both of them were gathered in the same meeting room, would this be the main unit or the group staying behind?

"By the way, why do you want to join the main unit?"

Leon's gaze pierced in his direction.

"The information about the third organization is being kept a secret even within Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>. Moreover, as it's a joint unit with the Governmental Sector, the Sennenshi and Priestesses would be at the forefront and the main unit would consist of those of the Cadres Guard level. You should also be aware of that."

It was a mission which a Cadet Guard could name himself for. Despite knowing that, is there a reason you're pushing for it anyway? — Leon was implicitly adding that.

".....Something like that."

"With that response, it seems like there is something."

Leon sighed with wryness mixed in. In front of his old friend, Sheltis ignored that and looked up at the ceiling lighting.

"Well, I guess there are two reasons. Both of them are related to Ymy and I."

A bright light.

Even though it seemed like he could grasp it by reaching his hand out, it would slip through the gaps in his fingers.

"You remember the floating archipelago <Lagoon> we went to together, right?"

"That time we searched the deserted research facility. It looked like the Governmental Sector's work no matter how we thought of it back then."

"At that place.....you didn't fight it directly, but Monica and I fought a Yuugenshu there. That was the first thing that caught my interest."

The Yuugenshu being nurtured in a water tank, known as the '  
*Sleeping Child*

'. Why, for what reason and with what techniques did they cultivate a

Yuugenshu?

"Nurturing a Yuugenshu is not something somebody would normally think of. ....There should be something to it. If we figure out the third organization's objective, the investigations into the Yuugenshu and the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> should also progress. It might also be able to lessen the load on Ymy."

"I see, so that's the reason connected to Ymy."

It seemed that he'd understood as his expression loosened.

"The other one is?"

"The Lords of Unusual Books."

"The shinryoku spell caster known as Golden Maha? I heard you repelled him though."

"No, not him. The other one known as Igun-I. You also know about the case a while ago where a mail was simultaneously sent to Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>'s work terminals that went like, '

*A Yuugenshu which is taking on human form is in Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>*

' . That was also his work."

".....That was? No, wait. If that wasn't a joke or prank mail, then that Igun-I guy knows about your—"

Leon's expression turned doubtful.

"That would mean he knows about your mateki."

".....That's the second reason."

The power to freely operate Mikuva's Crimson Eye and the mysterious aria which resembled mateki.

Also, why did he know about my mateki?

"Those Lords of Unusual Books knew about my mateki. Knowing that, they said something like '

*Let's meet again*

'.....it seemed like they knew something about my mateki."

"So they might know something about how to remove your mateki too. ....I see, that would explain why you raised your hand."

"Well, there's a problem before that though."

He looked around the meeting room which only had the two of them.

".....Isn't it taking too long for someone else to come?"

"It's unexpected, but were the only ones sent to this room us?"

Leon glanced at the wall-mounted digital clock.

"I'm also interested in the attitude of "

*Heaven's Wheel*

' which remained in 269-F. Though I think we can react to anything that happens since Ran stayed back."

And.

Clack — a light footstep sounded from the corridor.

"Oh, this high heel sound would make it her."

"O—kay. Thanks for waiting, you two, now let's get straight into the strategy meeting—"

Opening the door with gusto was Meimel with her usual smile.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

"I'm tired of waiting."

"Sorry~~. But I prepared black tea and snacks because I thought it might take a while, you know? It would've been okay if you'd eaten them while waiting."

The Priestess winked with a teasing smile.

"As my excuse, I had to explain to everybody in the three rooms in order by myself. With convenience in mind, it can't be helped if the room which requires a strategy meeting is left for last, right?"

"Maybe so but—"

Leon forced back the words he was about to speak.

"Wait, did you just say strategy meeting? That means"

"As you surmised."

The Priestess who managed the tower suddenly turned her gaze in his direction.

"You two, as part of the joint unit with the Governmental Sector — I appoint you to the main unit."

The joint unit which would infiltrate the third organization's base.

Moreover, the main unit.

".....Under, stood."

At the same time he acknowledged it, his stiff shoulders were hit with a sense of exhaustion.

.....I'm glad.

.....That's one step forward. The possibility of nearing the secret of the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> has appeared.

"Sheltis and I are part of the main unit so we're together with those two from the Governmental Sector, huh."

"That's how it'll be. Sorry, Leon, you didn't even raise your hand but I put you in the main unit."

"If that is the will of the Tower, then I have no reason to oppose it. Now then, I'd like to get down to hearing this strategy meeting."

"That's right—. Well then, let's start with the entire thing. First, what was the



criteria for how everyone that was in the room was split up? You're curious about it, right? Ah, a cup of tea before that."

She held the ceramic cup that nobody had touched with grace and started pouring tea from the teapot.

"As you know, I split the members in the first room into three. There are a total of nine people between meeting rooms D, F and H. The sisters, Viola and Horn, are on standby so they're a separate matter."

"So it's three for the main unit, separate unit and those staying behind."

"My, you're close, Leon. But that's not perfect. Fifty points."

"

.....What?

"

"There are three meeting rooms but there are four roles. That's the point right now. ....Oh my, that's not nice—, don't look at me with such doubtful eyes. I'll explain properly."

Meimel placed the teacup to her lips.

"Speaking from the results, you two of meeting room D are the main unit. After that, Ran and the three Cadet Guards I made stay in meeting room F are the ones staying behind. Ymy and Ishtar who were sent to meeting room H are one of the separate units. Do you understand up to there?"

"The last thing I'm curious about is that '  
*one of the separate units*  
' part."

Leon pointed it out blandly with a serious face. And that was exactly right; she had specifically added '  
*one of*  
' to it so it was like there also a '  
*second*'."

"Well, we'll leave that for later. Next is.....right, shall we talk about the distribution of everybody?"

As if having discerned the murmurs within him, Meimel continued. Raising her hand up slowly, she extended her index and middle fingers.

"First, for the joint unit, this was decided almost immediately. At any rate, there are only two from the Governmental Sector. For covert operation, it's

understandable to have a few elite. In that case, we of Tenketsu Palace must also send a few elite. Would it be appropriate to send two like the Governmental Sector or three? Then let's put two in the main unit, one in the separate unit and have the remainder stay behind. Like this, the general framework was decided."

"

Hearing that, I'm relieved. The Governmental Sector said there could be up to five, but if we sent out five Sennenshi or Priestess-level people, the overall strength of the tower would be in danger.

"

"That's exactly it. Speaking from how it turned out, no Priestesses are in the main unit or separate unit. It would be a great departure from a Priestess' true role and, to begin with, there are no Priestesses excelling in covert techniques. At this point in time, it has been decided for Ymy, Viola and I to remain in the tower. Then came what to do with the main unit.....right, Sheltis?"

The Priestess looked at him with a meaningful sidelong glance.

"The joint plan with the Governmental Sector. I was happy that you raised your hand to start with, but I would have had you take part even if you didn't."

".....Is that how it was?"

"The reason is simple. The ones that you will be facing from now on are Golden <Maha> and Blank <Igun-I> and the one who knows them the best is you. Particularly the Lord of Unusual Books known as Blank <Igun-I> has not been seen by a single Priestess or Sennenshi. We only know his name."

"

Ah, I see. If you think about it calmly, that's true—. There was a reason you would be chosen for sure.

"

".....Apparently."

The only one who knew the appearance of Blank <Igun-I> who had appeared at the Governmental Sector's Holy Hall was just him.

Rather than the minus point of being a Cadet Guard, the plus point of having directly confronted and gained information on two of the Lords of Unusual Books was greater.

"

Then, Meimel, the reason for adding Leon to the main unit is really that?

"

"Yes, with a long history of working together, they should be synched right down to their breathing. If it were anybody other than you in the main unit, I would have chosen Ran instead of Leon."

At any rate, this was how the two members of the main unit had been decided.

The next curious point was the single person in the separate unit.

"The one person chosen for the separate unit should be one who will be a simple and powerful fighting force. She should also have fought against one of the Lords of Unusual Books before. Now then, would it be Horn or Ran who are Sennenshi or possibly the Cadres Guard, Ishtar? But I have a different mission that I would like to give the Ishtar the Cadres Guard. That's why, there were two options for the separate unit. Now then, did I choose Ran? Or Horn?"

Both are Sennenshi. There's also no doubt about their strength.

"You chose Horn, correct?"

"Yes. She has a long history of experience in patrolling the Biotope and she should be specialized in solo action. Also, above all, her combat style is decisive."

".....Ah, I get it."

Sheltis himself used dual blades and Leon used a great sword. The battle formation of the main unit was specialized in close combat. What set the empty-handed Ran and gunner Horn apart was their compatibility.

"I've only seen a little, but I think her long-range guns will be a powerful support. She should be pretty strong against enemies that Leon and I are weak against."

"Yes. That's why I settled on Horn. I haven't told the person herself yet, but that should be fine."

Click.

Meimel placed the teacup back on the table.

"That is to say. Those remaining are automatically part of those staying behind."

".....I see. That's true."

Ran, Ymy, Ishtar.

Added to that the Cadet Guards consisting of Monica, Kagura and Vaiel would be remaining in the tower.

"I wonder if it's disappointing that your comrades from the same unit weren't chosen."

".....No, the reasons I heard just now for the distribution were very convincing."

He thought that Meimel's decisions were accurate. If each person had to be a fighting force on their own, then it was natural to choose Sennenshi.

.....But I wonder if that's the reason for this unease in my chest.

.....I feel like Monica, Kagura and Vaiel haven't been valued. It can't be helped for that to bother me.

And then he realized.

He who had once been an Elite Guard and returned to the tower just to keep

his promise of protecting Ymy.....

Had, at some point in time, come to think of the other Cadet Guards as treasured '*comrades*'.

"May I continue?"

".....Ah, y-yes! That's fine!"

He took a deep breath to change gears. On the other hand, Leon was still leaning the wall and keeping a tranquil expression.

"So, Meimel, is it okay to think of the separate unit as consisting of only Horn?"

"It's just about time I got around to that. First of all, you may think of Horn as the only member of the separate unit. But that wasn't with the intention of creating a support team. That is the '*separate unit disguised as a group staying behind*'

'I mentioned not too long ago. It is formed from Syun-rei, Ymy and the Cadres Guard, Ishtar."



"

Ahh, I might know what you mean. Remote observation using the Priestesses' clairvoyance.

"

"Correct."

Meimel clapped for machine crystal <Ilis> who was flashing.

"If it's Syun-rei, it should be possible to even listen in as far as the floating archipelago <Lagoon>. I'll ask her to keep watch over your actions in detail. That information will be shared with Ymy and she will relay it to myself, Ran, Viola or Cadres Guard Ishtar. If something unexpected happens, the tower's support unit will be able to immediately take action under Cadres Guard Ishtar's instructions. ....And this is the important part, but we will not be information the Governmental Sector of this three-person team consisting of Syun-rei, Ymy and Cadres Guard Ishtar."

"It could be construed as surveillance of '

*Heaven's Wheel*

', huh."

"That's it. We don't know the background of their elites. If they show any suspicious movements, we'll inform you via telepathy.....although the

Governmental Sector knows that the Priestesses excel in such techniques so it'll be good if they don't interfere with it."

How's that? — Leon's reply was wry in response to the Priestess whose eyes were shining.

"I'm surprised."

"Oh?"

"They're words of praise. With the Governmental Sector's proposal, I wouldn't have thought you had calculated so much for the main unit, separate unit and remaining group to that extent."

".....I agree."

Sheltis' and Leon's opinions were roughly the same.

"

The Governmental Sector will be heading out on a counterattack now. We'll be entering one of the bases Kuro and I found.

"

Not even an hour had passed since the Number Nine <Huick>'s suggestion.

.....Her skill as a Priestess is also amazing, but I think she was already a person whose brain works fast to begin with.

"

Have you already spoken with everybody about this?

"

"Of course, I came here after having finished speaking to the other rooms. Cadres Guard Ishtar should be speaking with Viola and Horn about now as I requested. After that, it would be best to head out quickly like the Governmental Sector side said. The plan is for you to leave the day after tomorrow in the morning and return within the same day. I don't think you'll need to bring much but are both of you okay in terms of weapon maintenance and health?"

Departure on the day after tomorrow. He had expected such but it was really quick.

At Meimel's question, Sheltis exchanged looks with Leon who was against the wall.

"I.....leave the weapon maintenance up to Ilis and my health is fine. How about you?"

"My health is always perfect."

"I thought you'd say that."

"Right—"

"He's a walking picture of health."

Everybody there let out a wry sigh.

On the other hand, the person in question had a serious face to the end and was taking out his badge.

"I'll apply for the expedition. After that is some miscellaneous schedule arrangement and.....Syun-rei is in charge of Hyouketsu Kyoukai until tomorrow afternoon so after she rests up, I'll speak to her about the circumstances. How about you?"

"Me? I don't have much to bring either so if you're applying for the expedition, there's nothing—"

Despite saying up to there, Sheltis closed his mouth partway through his words.

".....I'd like to say something to everybody in my unit."

"Riiight. That might really be necessary."

Meimel leaked a breath.

"I've also finished explaining the circumstances to the three members of your unit. But it looked like they were saddened from my perspective as well. Especially the unit captain, Monica-san. That girl was making a pained expression."

".....Is that so."

"Ahh, also, those two from "

*Heaven's Wheel*

' are guests in the end, so I plan to give them guest IDs with transmission

functions and have them stay at the tower's hotel. If there's something you'd like to ask them directly, speak to me. Okay, with that, we're done. I also have a mountain of things to coordinate."

Clapping her hands, Meimel herself was the first to turn around. Right behind her was Leon.

"Aren't you going?"

".....Just a second."

The teacup Meimel had left behind. He just stared at its flowing liquid surface.

"I wonder what I should tell them."

His comrades who were down. Because his vague feeling of '

*I have to talk to them*

' came first, he didn't actually know what to say.

"

Though it was expected that Monica and the others wouldn't pass the selection. After all, it was a gathering of Priestesses, Sennenshi and the Cadres Guard, Ishtar. There wouldn't even be a place for Regular Guards to come in,

and for Monica and the others who are Cadet Guards, even more so. Even your being chosen is something which is based upon coincidental special circumstances.

"

".....I understand that."

He sighed very deeply.

Like that — only Sheltis was left behind in the room which returned to silence.

### **Part 3**

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, floor 17.

Coming out into the elevator hall, Monica stood silently for a while.

"It's a pity, Monica. However.....well, I think it can't be helped that we weren't chosen."

Kagura spoke from behind her. One of the '

*Nell Folk*

' demi-humans, she was a petite girl who had a machine helmet worn low over her eyes.

Right behind her was a tall and muscular man who contrasted with her, Vaiel.

"Can't be helped, right? Raising our hands because it looks like it'd be hard on him alone is fine and all, but it wasn't the kind of conversation Cadet Guards can butt into. At any rate, there were Priestesses, Sennenshi and Cadres Guard Ishtar in that meeting room, ya know?"

"Right. There was no opening for a Cadet Guard to interrupt. He was chosen amongst that because he has seen both Golden <Maha> and Blank <Igum-I> and, despite it being a clone, he has an achievement for having defeated Golden <Maha>. I believe Meimel-sama's selection reasoning to be correct."

".....Hnn."

Vaiel snorted meaningfully.

"Don't you also fit the bill for that?"



"Yes. It's true that I was the first one to find those two at the Governmental Sector and during the fight against Golden 's clone, I was also there with Sheltis.

However,

only he has spoken face-to-face with Blank and is acquainted with '*Heaven's Wheel*

'. There is a reason for only him being chosen."

"So it was a given that he'd be chosen and we wouldn't, huh."

"Ye—"

Yes. Before Kagura could agree with that.

".....Unit."

"Eh?"

"We're in the same unit as him.....is that not enough?"

Monica squeezed out a hoarse voice.

"I am.....the unit captain for his unit but is that not enough?"

"That's difficult."

The girl's answer was swift.

"Sheltis is a member and Monica is the captain. That doesn't have enough sway on its own. A different, more firm reason is necessary."

".....That's true."

She didn't have to be told to know that.

The reason she had been left out of the Priestess' decision was because she lacked strength. Even if she had made it to the final exam for Priestesses, she would be overshadowed by a real Priestess. Even her strength as a Guard amounted to nothing before the Sennenshi gathered there.

.....Everything is half-baked.

.....Even though I understand that the best.....myself.....

Since I know that, my reason for wanting to follow after Sheltis.....what is it?

"....."

"Monica, is that fine?"

".....Yeah. That's right, I can't be moping around forever. What's done is done so all that's left is to put it behind me as soon as possible."

In order to convey that to the other two, she took a deep breath.

"Tomorrow's morning training will be as planned. We'll gather at four thirty at the outdoor training grounds and do some training that we don't usually do. Since Sheltis will be missing, we'll treat it as if a member has been wounded and think of a three-person formation."

"Eh—.....I thought you would have thought of something fun for once."

"Freakin' pain in the ass."

"It's fine; if I say we're doing, we're doing it! We also have to practice those kinds of things!"

Overcoming the two who were sighing, Monica replied with a clenched fist.

## **Part 4**

Moonlight.

Hyuuuuuuu.....the wind which passed through the half-closed window swayed the curtains. Bluish-white moonlight poured in through the flowing curtains.

".....It's bright."

Within the wrapped blankets, she slightly opened her eyes.

"Ahh.....I forgot to close the window."

Unable to stand the moonlight's brightness which was burning her eyes, Monica sprung out of bed. She continued forward with her pajamas disheveled, hazy vision and tottering steps.

The window closed with a pishaa sound.

.....Okay.

The brightness aside, there was also no fear of her shoulders getting cold from the draft. With this, she should be able to secure her precious sleep hours before the early morning training. Falling back onto the bed once again, she squirmed back into the covers and closed her eyes.



Just like that, she entered a dream as usual. Or so it should have been.

".....Why.....can't I sleep?"

The sound waves vibrated the stagnant air.

.....I can't sleep.

She still had physical and mental fatigue. Normally she would fall asleep with the speed of losing consciousness but only today was her mind so strangely awake and clear.

.....I wonder why.

.....At times like this, I only remember bad things from the past.

What she remembered most often was the final Priestess exam three years ago. From the night prior to the exam, she had set foot on the highest floor of the tower, '

*Paradise*

' — the next thing she remembered was being informed that she had failed the final exam.

.....It definitely started back then.

.....That I became reflective of the past.

Despite her sadness at failing the final exam having disappeared, the void in her chest gouged out with the shock of that time had not been buried and still remained.

"....."

She placed a hand to her barren chest.

"

Unfortunately, you will be the group remaining at the tower.

"



.....It's nothing.....today.....should be nothing major.

Compared with the final exam which was limited to a single opportunity, receiving the notification that they hadn't been selected was nothing. At best, it was a one-time thought; it was something light when considering the bitter experiences she had gone through as a Cadet Guard.

Then why am I this concerned about it?

The reason I'm concerned to the point of being unable to sleep should definitely lie there—

"

.....We're in the same unit as him.....is that not enough?

"

Truthfully, she didn't want to join the Governmental Sector joint unit.

But he.....Sheltis had raised his hand signifying he wanted to go so she had thought that she had to go as well as unit captain and raised her hand.

".....When did I first meet him?"

"

H-Hey! Are you still free? You haven't paired up with anybody?

"

Pairing up by chance for the pair unit battle as two people who hadn't found a partner was the occasion. After that, they went together with Captain Leon to the floating archipelago <Lagoon>.

"You should just make a new unit."

As Instructor Yumelda said, they began searching for members in a unit consisting of only the two of them. He and I created this unit. That's why, no matter what, I can't think of acting as a unit without him.....however.

.....For it to be this rough on me just being away from him for several days.

.....Is that really the only reason?

A different, stronger reason.

A reason that she couldn't even sleep.....if there was.....such a thing.

"

.....When I was an apprentice Priestess, there was a Guard boy that I admired. That's all.

"

".....I'm being stupid."

Facing up while on the ground, she wiped her eyes.

.....Why didn't I realize something this simple?

"

.....Well.....the air about you is similar to his so I kind of can't ignore you.

"

The boy with an air which resembled the dual swords user she admired.

While operating as a unit together with him, a single feeling had sprouted. But the feeling was not admiration.

.....

.....It's not admiration.

.....

"No matter how you look at it.....a crush.....huh."

She didn't know what she liked.

She didn't think it was her being attracted to something special. However — despite it only being for several days, she couldn't suppress her anxiety at him being apart from the unit.

" ..... "

Her fingertip that had touched her eye was damp.

A tear traveled across her cheek and wet her pajama's collar.

The reason her tears were so naturally wetting her eyes was unknown to her. That's why it was so agonizing, painful and irritating—

"I'm.....an idiot."

"Senpai?"

"—!?"

She thought her heart would stop at the sudden telepathic message.

"Ymy?"

"

Y-Yes! Umm.....sorry for disturbing you so late at night. The truth is, I'd like to

Speak about today.

"

"....."

"Senpai?"

Without responding to Ymy's telepathy, Monica quietly gulped.

She couldn't have happened to have heard what I was saying to myself until not too long ago?.....No, it's fine. What I said was fragmentary and it's no big deal even if they're all put together.

"I-It's nothing! So what is it that you're calling so late at night for?"

"Well.....it's nothing major. You see, senpai, you didn't get to go with the Governmental Sector like you wanted to.....and one of your unit members was taken so you should have various worries.....s-so....."

"Ahh, I get what you're trying to say."

A smile unknowingly rose up on her face at her kouhai's reserved and hesitant speech.

"You'll listen to my worries?"

"Ah, n-no! That would be impertinent of me.....I was just thinking about if there was anything. I think it would be best to let those loose instead of keeping them inside you."

"....."

.....I wonder if that's true.

But this aching that won't let me sleep will probably continue from when he leaves to when he comes back. I'm already like this before he departs.....what will happen tomorrow or the day after.

The void in her chest ached harder and harder.

"....."

"Senpai?"

".....Could I come over there right now?"

## Part 5

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, floor 287.

This floor which contained the Priestesses' private rooms quietly became quiet as if to match with the darkness of night.

There was not a single person. With the consideration of not disturbing the Priestesses' sleep, staff did not go to this floor at night. Security as well. To begin with, operation of the private elevator was required and that could only be operated by tower staff's electronic identification keys.

In the off chance that an enemy from outside were to infiltrate, the Priestesses had the Sennenshi with them. That was why the Priestess floor was devoid of people and always filled with silence.

".....I wonder if senpai will be here soon."



In the living space of the room, Ymy was propped up on her hands, leaning on the table.

She was still wearing her Priestess vestments. Though that was because she had been together with Meimel and Leon until this late having a discussion.

".....Tomorrow, hmmm."

The joint unit between the Governmental Sector and Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> would deploy.

The main unit would consist of the Number Nine <Huick> from '*Heaven's Wheel*

' and his assistant, Kuro, as well as Sheltis and Leon. It was decided the separate unit would have the Sennenshi, Horn. Moreover, there would be a remote support unit consisting of herself and Syun-rei relaying information by clairvoyance and telepathy. It seemed that Cadres Guard Ishtar would also be on standby to move her subordinates at a moment's notice.

.....It's kind of an amazing gathering.

It was weird for her to say it as one of the members, but pretty much all members participating in the plan were representatives of the floating

continent <Orbie Clar>. .....But even amongst them.

"Sheltis really is amazing."

While still leaning on one of her hands, she extended the other and grabbed the glass atop the table.

Click — the ice floating upon the liquid's surface sounded out a musical scale.

"He was chosen as a member of a joint unit together with those people despite still being only a Cadet Guard."

Even if he had been an Elite Guard in the past.

He had fallen from the floating continent <Orbie Clar> to the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> and been exiled from Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> for having mateki within himself — he lost everything and went to the Living Districts. Then a period of two years passed.

Starting again from the position of a Cadet Guard. What Sheltis has now is because he has worked hard since then.

"Yup, yup! I also have to do my best as part of the support unit!"

I'll be together with Syun-rei so there's nothing to worry about, but I really am still weak in telepathy and clairvoyance. I need to steady myself.

—Ding.

"Senpai?"

The sound of the doorbell came.

"It's me; sorry about coming so late at night."

"Ah, it really is senpai! Okay then, I'll open it now!"

Within the darkness of the corridor was the faint outline of a girl.

"Thanks but I feel awkward having my kouhai looking out for me."

"No such thing! Rather, it's unexpected that there is anything I can do for you."

.....Yeah, it really is unexpected.

For this person to rely on me — no, for her to rely on anybody is extremely rare.

"Would you like tea or something else?"

"No, I'll pass. It won't take that long. It's just....."

Monica sat on the chair across from Ymy. Rather than the formal wear she had grown used to seeing, she was wearing a sweatsuit.

"A consultation?"

"Yeah.....if it'll help me be at peace."

Her eyes were downcast and her voice seemed like it was about to vanish.

"Senpai, that's not like you. You have to be more like zing! Come and talk with me about anything. Don't hold back!"

**[T/N: Zing being a sound effect here to indicate a sharpness. It's referencing her serious personality.]**

"G-Got it....."

Monica squirmed around and shifted her position in the seat many, many times.

"It's about what happened at noon. One of our unit's members was selected for the joint unit between Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> and the Governmental Sector. His name is Sheltis."

"Yes. I was also there."

.....Coincidences are amazing.

She had been thinking of him herself just now.

"It's amazing. A Cadet Guard was chosen out of all those present. As for

senpai.....it's a pity but you'll be able to focus on your duty as unit leader instead."

".....Yeah. From the beginning, I thought the position of unit leader didn't suit me but there's merit in doing it. I also feel like the two other members are synchronizing."

Monica joined her hands together atop the table.

"That's the result of senpai having gathered them together and doing her best."

"I did it.....with Sheltis."

"Eh?"

Her senpai's downcast face.

That was when Ymy realized that her cheeks were dyed slightly red.

"I quit being an apprentice Priestess and.....it's been three years already but I was still dragging along my past as an apprentice Priestess and what changed

that was definitely my meeting with him, I think."

"....."

"As you said, Sheltis is amazing. I'm interested in what he did before but I won't ask if he won't talk about it. Rather than that, I'd like to cherish how much he's helped me."

".....That's right.....I think."

A single droplet of sweat drew a thin thread-like line down her cheek and fell to her lap.

.....What?

.....What.....is this.....strange feeling?

.....Somehow.....I have a bad premonition.....even though I'm just listening to what senpai wants to say, why do I feel this cold?

"It started when we fought against the Yuugenshu and I received

encouragement from him and gained courage. What is it.....it felt like I had been able to go back to my initial resolution. I thought that if we continued to do our best together in the unit — but that's not it. Different feelings sprouted at some point in time."

"....."

"He's separating from me for the joint unit with the Governmental Sector and that may be a good thing in terms of results. Because I've come to honestly face my feelings."

—It's hard to breathe.

A very small doubt that had not been more than a premonition. She could tell that it was growing bigger very quickly and eating away at her deep within her chest.

.....No, it can't be.

.....No way.

She realized it.



The reason for Monica's expression. The meaning for her embarrassed and happy expression.

.....Only that is.....

.....Even if it's senpai, only that is.....

"Your feelings?"

".....Yeah."

Monica put a hand to her chest and took a deep breath. Then—

.....No.

.....Stop it.....only that.....please.....noooo!

"St—"

"It looks like I've fallen for him."

Within her heart, she heard the sound of something bursting.

.....Ah.

.....Ahh.....ahh.....

"Ymy?"

"\_\_"

Facing her, Monica was saying something.

But.....no.....my.....head is completely blank and I can't think. I have to say it.....even though I need to say it.

"Uh.....ummm."

"Mm?"

"I.....I.....I too....."

I also think of Sheltis more than anybody else.

That's why.....I need to say it.....or if Monica-senpai really confesses to Sheltis.....what would happen?

Monica-senpai is a wonderful person even from my point of view.

And she's able to meet and speak with him every day as part of the same unit. She can be much closer to him than I can right now. More than I.....more than I who can't even touch him with a single finger because of Elbert resonance.....much, much more....."

"....."

"Ymy, what's wrong? It really must be because you're up this late."

"Ahh, that's.....that's not it! It's not that my health is

suffering.....but.....well....."

.....I can't say it.

Senpai could feel relieved by revealing this because it's me, so there's no way I can tell her that I've been interested in Sheltis since a long time ago.

If I do that, then I will surely be unable to maintain the same relationship with senpai.

We would be awkward and unable to look each other in the eyes.....then what should be done? What should I do?

".....I'm sorry for pushing you to meet me. Ymy, you really should rest now as well. You're busy tomorrow too, right?"

Monica stood from the chair with a clack.

"Thanks. It was really sudden and extremely personal so it may have shocked you, but having you listen calmed me down."

"Ahh, senpai, wait, wa——"

Wait! She intended to shout that at the back heading towards the door but only a strained breath came out in reality.

"....."

The girl left the room. The room's door was shut.

Left all alone in her room, Ymy idly stood still.

.....My legs won't move.

.....Nor my arms, fingers, neck, shoulders, everything; it feels like they're not part of me.

A doll whose heart has been stolen.

".....Why."

Her lips moved slightly for a few words of sorrow.

"I didn't intend to....."

I came to know what I shouldn't have.

I heard what I shouldn't have.

"....."

And above all, I couldn't say it.

She had been scared to convey her feelings. She had also been scared that her relationship with her senpai would end should she have said it.

But more than that, the shock she had taken was too great and her heart had become empty.

.....This feeling.

.....I.....What should I do?

".....!"

Leaking out a wordless cry, Ymy collapsed at that spot.

# Chapter 2 - Those Who Set Off. Those Who Wish. Those Who Continue to Pray

## Part 1

"Eyri-nee, heyyy, Eyri-nee."

".....Fua?"

"Wake up, wake up. It's already noon."

"U—n, it's still noon so one more hour.....wait, noon!?"

With a voice bordering on being a scream, Eyriey flew out of bed.

Scratching off her bed hair roughly, she threw off her pajama which was a simple shirt in a big rush.

"No way, it's already this time!? I completely slept in!"



While changing into her favorite overalls which were soaked with the smell of machine oil, she narrowed her eyes against the bright light pouring in from the window—

".....Mm."

Slowly coming back to calm, she looked around where she was.

A delicate glass chandelier adorning the ceiling was shining and underfoot was a thick carpet. The bed she had been sleeping on was enough for one, two, even three people, and it would still have room.

".....When did my room become this extravagant?"

"This is a hotel."

Yuto sank herself into a large cushion as she happily informed her.

"Yesterday, at the tower—"

"Ah, right, right. You had a meeting with Shasa-chan."

Her notebook had fallen beside the pillow.

.....Ahh, I was confirming the details of our meeting.....and fell asleep like that, huh.

"Eyri-nee, Eyri-nee! Yuto also properly kept a '  
*memo*

'. See, '  
*Early in the morning, I take off on an airship together with Eyri-nee!'*."

"Oh—, that's amazing, Yuto; I also made absolutely certain to write it down. At any rate, Shasa-chan said we couldn't meet her at work today."

Turning over the notebook, she flipped to the page with a large tag attached.

"Hrm? For the day before's preparations, it's '  
*my luggage*

' so I guess that's pretty much snacks. Next is a first-class airship pilot's license and that's in my pocket, so that's all good. Next is.....what, it's just to head to floor 59's mechanical bureau's airship department and do the procedure. After that, we just have to go to the airport on floor 65."

"For all the anno—ying stuff, Shasa-nee said, '  
*I will make the arrangements'!*"

"Right, as expected of a clerk for the tower. I'm bad with troublesome things so it's a big help."

"

Could I have you go along with Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> and the Governmental Sector's unit as the airship's pilot?

"

.....Well, I went with Sheltis, Monica and Leon to the floating archipelago <Lagoon> before, so it should be fine.

The airship was attacked by a lightning sprite that time so it was dangerous, but this time it was a normal infiltration mission so it should be safe.....should be safe.....really?

".....They won't have a reason to shoot down the infiltrators with the airship, will they?"

"Eyri-nee!"

Yuto was jumping around on the sofa and used the rebound force off the cushion to make a big jump. With that, she hugged onto her shoulders.

"Eyri-nee, Shasa-nee said, '

*It'll be fine if it's Eyriey!'*."

"Mu, true. I feel like it'll somehow work out. Well then, let's make sure to transport Sheltis and the others! I got paid too, after all."

"Oh—!"

While holding onto Yuto, she sank into the sofa.

"With that decided, right now we should go to the mechanical bureau's airship division and submit an airship pilot application. When did Shasa said we had to go?"

"4 AM."

"....."

"If not, the registration won't be in time, she said."

"....."

She stole a glance at the digital clock.

".....What time is it?"

"A little after 12, noon. Hey, Eyri-nee, Yuto's hungry!"

"——Gyaaaaaaaa, oh crap! Yuto, eat this donut. I'm heading to floor 59!"

Eyriey tossed the snack in her pocket to Yuto and ran out at full speed.

[T/N: "snack" written above "emergency rations".]

## Part 2

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, floor 287.

In the room of the Priestess whom he guards, he was sitting directly atop the carpet spread on the floor.

—This is already a habit.

He was bad at sitting in a chair. He couldn't help being uneasy when sitting in a chair. It was a different matter if it was hefty like a large sofa, but if not, then he would prefer to stand or sit on the floor.

That was even more so when he was trying to concentrate on things.

"\_\_"

He straightened his back and closed his eyes.

He hoisted his great sword which had been designed just for him at a non-standard size and swung it down with all his strength. Drawing his ideal swordsmanship in the air, he traced and carved that line countless times with the edge of his great sword.

Image training.

It was something he did when he couldn't leave his Priestess' side in place of actual training.

.....There's still room to improve my swordsmanship.

.....I can become stronger.

In the back of his mind was the figure of another person who lined up directly beside him. At times, it was Sheltis, and at others, it was his coworkers like Ran or Horn.

.....I wonder if I can surpass my ideal.

.....Surpass my older brother.

No matter how much he polished his sword skills, the distance between his ideal and himself never shortened. To close that gap even by one centimeter, by one millimeter, he continued to swing his sword in the back of his mind—

".....Leon."

That scenery vanished like mist in an instant.

".....Are you going tomorrow?"

Atop the bed and lying down was a girl with a listless expression which he could see from the side. It wasn't that she didn't get up. Leon knew that she didn't even have the energy to get up.

"Syun-rei, it's okay if you don't try to force yourself to get up. Sleep for today. I will be here."

"....."





The girl had continued to pray for Hyouketsu Kyoukai for three days.

It had only been three hours since she had entrusted authority to Queen Salah again. Her stamina depleted, normally she would fall into a sleep so deep that she wouldn't wake up no matter what happened.

".....Meimel said it. That you're going together with people from the Governmental Sector."

"That's right."

Meimel had sent her the information by telepathy while she was praying for the barrier. Syun-rei already knew that he would be heading for the third organization.

".....Are you going?"

—Are you leaving me and going?

The black-haired girl's wavering eyes were conveying that.

"So you heard it from Meimel."

The girl wordlessly nodded.

"Then you also heard about your own mission."

She would remain behind at the tower with Ymy and observe their joint unit with clairvoyance.

It was an important role made because of their caution of the Governmental Sector's '

*Heaven's Wheel*

', of course, but also to contact Horn who was in the separate unit.

"It's because you're looking that I can move without worry."

"....."

"While I'm gone, I've left your guard up to Ran. Actually, if you're worried, then watch over me with clairvoyance."

"....."

"Putting aside success or failure, we'll be departing tomorrow and be gone for the day.....and come back in the morning the day after. I'll be back soon so just rest yourself here at the tower."

".....Yeah."

The edges of her mouth loosened slightly — with that expression, she once again went to sleep. Yes, she should be too tired to even open her eyes.

.....That's just how worried she is.

Unrelated to shinryoku, Syun-rei's danger sense was sharp. It had been rare for her to worry this much even as of late.

"There might be one or two problems, huh. Did you perhaps come because you were worried about that too?"

".....I don't know why either."

The girl sat on the table behind him with a shadow hanging over her expression.

"It looks like you're feeling down compared to usual though."

".....Yeah. There was a bit of stuff yesterday."

Ymy smiled bitterly with circles under her eyes. She had come to the room around thirty minutes ago. When he asked, she hadn't asked to see Syun-rei but him.

"Syun-rei shouldn't wake up for a little while. I don't mind if you speak about it at leisure."

"Yeah. Rather than a chat, I came here thinking I wanted to get blasted by Leon. Maybe a harsh peptalk?.....Something a little painful happened."

"Rather than me, doesn't Meimel specialize in that?"

He was a Guard, not a Priestess.

A Guard's peptalk would basically consist of something like how the Instructor waved around her whip and shouted in a loud voice. For a Priestess, it was different; they would skillfully encourage the individual while taking in the individual's mental state. And that was the specialty of Ymy's senior Priestess, Meimel.

".....I just wanted to ask a guy. But I can't ask Sheltis."

"I don't mind, but don't expect much from me if it's difficult."

"It's fine if you answer in what ifs. What would you do if you had something really nagging at you other than the mission just before an important mission like this one?"

"It depends on the issue, but I'll generally forget about it."

"Forget about it until when?"

For the second question, he stared up at the ceiling for a little while in silence.

"It would more or less be completely gone from my head. I wouldn't remember until I returned from the mission and looked at the memo stuck on my room's door."

"Because you want to focus on the mission?"

"Yeah, I don't want to make a common mistake because I have some concern."

".....That's right."

Biting down on her lower lip, she whispered that as if speaking to herself. Her grief-stricken jasper eyes were swaying greatly.

"Is that how it is? Does everyone do that?"

"Of course."

".....I'm glad I asked you."

"Mm?"

"No, it's just me talking to myself. I just thought I was glad to have asked you. I believed that you would say it straight like this."

Ymy rubbed her shaded eyes and took a deep breath.

"Okay, I worried about it for an entire night, but that's no good! It's not like me! I'll keep myself from thinking about the thing with Monica-senpai until the day after tomorrow. Yup, yup, I need to concentrate on the important mission ahead of me right now. You can do it, me. Go for—"

".....Ymy, please be a little quieter."

".....I'm sorry."

Having been scolded by Syun-rei who was lying atop the bed, Ymy meekly bowed her head.

## Part 3



The heat wave scorched the earth bit by bit.

They walked endlessly with heavy equipment backpacks upon their backs across the desert which extended to the visible horizon. Their luggage included a week's worth of rations, tents, emergency clothes, communicators, *etc.* Their combined weight exceeded that of a grown male's.

"....."

"....."

Nobody said a word. Careful not to deplete even a tiny bit of their stamina, they simply continued forward and onward. Finally, ahead of their forced marched, they could faintly confirm a single white line close to the ground.

"\_\_"

The unit's spiritless pace quickened. They continued wordlessly for another five minutes and finally, the girl at the head of the unit crossed over the white line—

"——Journey.....complete!"

With a completely heartfelt voice, Monica who was at the head of the unit looked up at the sky.

".....I thought.....I'd die."

"So damn hottt, the hell.....kinda torture is this, oi."

After he came Kagura and Vaiel who managed to reach the white line and let out sighs of anguish. With their backs as his goal, he crossed the white line in last place—

"Ah—.....that was harsh, as expected."

With a backpack on his back, Sheltis wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. The overflowing sweat wouldn't stop. His clothes, from his shirt to his pants, were soaked with sweat.

"

You did ittt. Even though the women retired partway before.

"

".....That's because we were careless last time and let the heat enter our conversation."

"That's right, we would've somehow made it if we just hadn't spoken."

Monica and Kagura were also wiping their waterfall-like sweat with towels. On the other hand, Vaiel who had been successful last time as well still seemed to have some energy left.

.....As I thought, Vaiel has trained.

To begin with, he was blessed in his build. With the continuous training since he joined the unit, his raw physical strength had improved at a surprising rate, even from Sheltis' perspective.

"It looks like Vaiel could add on about 10% more weight."

"

No, no. By my calculations, he should be able to go up to 13%.

"

"Like hell I can do something that annoying."

It was an expected answer in some ways.

"Rather than that, how about you? You really fine lazing about here?"

"Me?"

"Nobody else there except you. Come on, what happened to that unit? Got kicked out or something?"

"Ahh, the preparations for that ended sooner that I expected."

He shrugged in response to what Vaiel pointed out.

He prepared all of his luggage last night. He was bored so he ended up joining in the training he should have been taking a rest from.

.....After that, I wanted to say I'd be taking a day off.

.....But if I think about it, I'm bad at those kinds of things.

He somewhat felt awkward so he would be leaving without saying it.

"But today's training is over the top so with the muscle pains tomorrow, it'll be a horrible sight to see. How about we leave it at this for today?"

"I'm also of the same opinion."

Monica put her backpack on the ground and agreed.

"Sheltis, this is good enough for today. At any rate, I applied for a three-man cell unit match after this. We'll somehow manage without you here."

"Ah, then at least let me watch—"

"No. That's it for today. Kagura, take my bag. Vaiel, go on ahead and complete the procedures with the Instructor. I'll send off Sheltis."

".....Got it."

He was basically forced to go with Monica to the exit at the edge of the training grounds.

"Well then, Monica, do your best for training."

"—Sheltis."

"Mm?"

Just before he was about to turn around, she stopped him.

"Uhh.....well, what to say.....don't be reckless in tomorrow's mission. Spare me from having you in the hospital after taking a Yuugenshu's attack when you return."

"I'm sorry about that."

He made a bitter smile when he remembered his head injury.

"And—"

"And?"

"Ah, no.....yeah."

Monica gulped and blinked repeatedly. ....I wonder what this is about; she doesn't usually do this so it's making me curious.

"You're departing tomorrow so even if you run late, you'll return by the morning of the day after tomorrow. I was wondering if you'd be here on the next weekly holiday."

"What I have planned? Nothing in particular."

If there were anything, it would be Eyriey and Yuto coming over to play, but they were too spontaneous so he couldn't tell.

"I-Is that so!? Then.....I have something to ask.....on the next weekly holiday, would you go to the Living Districts with me? I'd like you.....to show me around."

"The Living Districts?"

"I heard a little while ago from Kagura that you're well-informed about the Living Districts. I used to live in the Living Districts but after I came an apprentice Priestess, I've lived here so it's been a while. I have absolutely no idea what the cityscape looks like now."

"If that's all, then that's easy."

It was like his own backyard since he'd lived by working parttime at The Two Swans <Albireo> for two years after he was exiled from the tower.

"Is it okay if it's in the evening?"

"Ah, u, u.....n-no! Wait! If.....if you can find the time for it, a little before noon at the tower's gates would be good. Like that, we'd be able to eat together for lunch as well somewhere in the Living Districts. Of course, it's my treat!"

"Okay. Then I'll think of a restaurant that seems good."

"I-It's a promise!"

Monica nodded with her cheeks slightly reddened.

"I'll make sure to remember. —See you then."

Turning his back to the girl who serves as his unit leader, he headed towards



the tower.

".....So Monica's made her move, hmmmm."

"Yeah, come to think of it, Cadet Guards don't really go to the Living Districts much. Regular Guards are entrusted with policing the Living Districts though."

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Heh?"

"

.....Well, I did think you hadn't noticed. That itself was the category of speculation. There's just one thing.

"

For a moment, machine crystal <Ilis> left a pause where she seemed to be choosing her words before continuing.

"

It'll be fine if the situation doesn't twist strangely.

"

"Indeeeed, lady-killer."

—That voice came from his right, under the shade of a large tree.

"You are....."

Appearing casually from the shade was a tall, lean man with a sunny expression. He had a dark brown jacket over a light brown shirt and pants that matched in color. In contrast with his clothes that couldn't be called flashy, The greatly distorted rim of his cowboy hat was distinctive.

"We met just yesterday, but are you doing good? But ya know, nii-chan, you sure can do it even with that docile face. Right at high noon in that kind of atmosphere planning to go with a girl on a da—.....ugefuu!?"

"Huick-sama, thoughtless conversation is strictly forbidden."

"Th-Thoughtless, you say.....and what did you hit me with just now? It was harder than usual."

"The edge of this suitcase."

That hurts — the Ninth <Huick> sighed while pressing on his flank. The suited woman standing beside him was expressionlessly holding onto a large suitcase with both hands.

".....Huick?"

"Ohh, so you did remember my name. Listen up, nii-chan, names are important. The trick to moving up in society is to remember your business contact's face and name. Well, it's not a something Guards would be used to."

"So.....did you have some business with me? I thought we were departing tomorrow."

"To learn by watching."

The man dispatched from the Governmental Sector pointed with his chin at the training grounds he'd just come from with Monica.

"Just relaxing at the hotel is nice too but since I'm here at Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, so looking around and broadening my knowledge is what makes me an adult. And when I walked a little bit, I found an interesting place. Those are your training grounds or something, right?"

The wire mesh fence-isolated outdoor training grounds.

It was a large area which had at most a little under a thousand people and more than several hundred Cadet Guards at all times. For people who saw it for the first time, it was a sight which garnered interest.

"Ah, are you possibly asking us to guide you?"

"No, no, I wouldn't do something like have you take the trouble to do that. Rather than watching to learn, I'm the type to go hands-on. Kuro and I were thinking we should take the chance and participate."

"In the training? No, but that would be....."

The weapons being used had experimental techniques of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> incorporated so it should be rare for an outsider to be allowed to enter the training grounds. At most, they would have to watch from outside the wire mesh fence.....

"Don't worry."

Kuro who had been keeping silent said with a rare wry smile.

"We were already found and chased out by somebody called Instructor."

"Ah, I thought so."

"Shucks, how coldhearted. It would've been fine to let us train with them for a bit."

The Ninth <Huick>'s mouth tapered to a point in boredom.

"So when we got kicked out, we saw you, nii-chan. I called out to you to see how you were. So in reality, how are you?"

".....What do you mean?"

"You'd best be prepared for there to be people that can't return tomorrow."

The Governmental Sector secret military member had a smile on that could even be thought of as friendly.

"There are a total of three dangerous times. When we infiltrate their base, when we search their base and when we're withdrawing. —Isn't it fun? We're infiltrating the base of the guys who picked a fight with the Governmental

Sector in broad daylight. Being discovered is within expectations. Being found and running away but failing to do so is also within the realm of expectations."

".....And if we can't get away?"

"Who knows? Everybody can just do whatever they wanna."

Beside the man who shrugged his shoulders and joked, the woman accompanying him followed up with more.

"It's fine if you rampage as you like, are taken prisoner without struggle or join up with the enemy. Those who will return to the floating continent <Orbie Clar> are only those who manage to withdraw to outside the base."

"No mercy, huh."

"Myyy, how compassionate; these kinds of things usually have to be said beforehand. This time, we're even having Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> spare people so it's a great serving of blood. Riiight, Kuro?"

**[T/N: The word for sparing is also used for cutting.]**

"Of course, we have also informed the Priestesses."

.....I see, so that's the reason.

The main unit, separate unit and, on top of those, continuous observation by Priestesses for support. The reason such meticulous arrangements was because she was prepared for such sacrifices.

"That's all I wanted to say. See you then; I'll be expecting things from you tomorrow, okay?"

"Excuse us."

The Ninth <Huick> waved his hand casually and Kuro bowed her head deeply.

Watching the two head off from behind, Sheltis unconsciously clenched his fists tightly to the point that they became sweaty.

## **Part 4**

The Elite Guard residences.

Comprised of floors 251 to 259 of the tower, they served as lodging and training rooms for the Elite Guards who were candidates to become the next generation Sennenshi. Even of those, floor 259 which was at the top was the living area and training place solely for Cadres Guard Ishtar who stood at the summit.

".....Onee-sama, what is this dubious machine?"

It was a silver cuboid which looked like it could fit her if she were to ball up. There were suspicious, flashing parts and some numbers were being converted into a graph on an LCD screen.

"We were told to investigate this, but I don't even know what this is."

She kicked the edge of the machine and sighed.

—Jeez, just when I thought she called me suddenly.

Sneaking a peak at her sister who was holed up in the kitchen, I'sa sighed.



"Mm—, I'sa-chan, how is it going?"

"It's not going at all. That's why I need you to tell me what this machine is."

"I was told it's a communicator. Can't you tell by looking?"

A carefree voice echoed from the kitchen.

"I wouldn't be having trouble if I could understand by looking. What is this rough.....rather, this thing is lacking too much in terms of design so I can't see it as anything other than a mysterious silver box."

"It's pointless for you to expect anything from the Mechanical Bureau's design."

The one who responded as such was a bald man sitting in a chair and drinking from a teacup with grace.

"For a communicator, the important part is the reliability and durability. After that is resistance against sudden impacts."

".....Then you help too, Jin. If we don't get back to practice soon, we'll get chewed out by the boss."

**[T/N: "Boss" written as "Captain Ran".]**

Jin Ixnaris — the dual gunman paired with I'sa. While still in his early twenties, his calm bearing and bald appearance made him seem more mature than his years.

"That's right—. Jin, you're a gunner so you're good with machines, right? The inspection has to be done quickly and returned to the owner or it's a nuisance."

"I don't mind but who entrusted you with this?"

"It was Horn-chan—"

"Geh."

I'sa's face tensed when Ishtar said that name nonchalantly.

The third Sennenshi, Horn Nova. She was the Ex Machina versed in all manners of heavy firearms and the captain in charge of the third Guard unit.

"I might.....be bad at dealing with her."

Especially her expressionlessness. No matter the subject, she wouldn't budge an eyebrow, and the truth was she thought she was a robot because of how much she couldn't read her emotions. On the other hand, her older sister had said "She's actually a shy person".....she wanted to ask but didn't have the courage to ask the person herself.

"But, onee-sama? Why would Captain Horn do that?"

"We'll be using them on missions and Ishtar and Horn-chan will carry the main communicator and an additional set respectively. That's why Ishtar was also asked to inspect it."

".....It seems like you'd be shot down for skimping on the inspection."

"Let's get this done quick. The main communicator is this giant box and the additional handset is this handheld terminal, right?"

Taking out the terminal with skilled movements, Jin tossed one of them over.

"I'll speak from one of the edges of the floor, so confirm if you can hear me."

".....Is that good enough for an inspection?"

"Talking and hearing. It's the most important inspection for a communicator."

The dual gunner responded in a serious tone and heading to a corner of the living room with the additional handset in one hand.

.....They specifically prepared a communicator.

.....That basically means they'll be communicating over distances where telepathy can't be used?

I'sa also had not been informed of the fine details of her older sister's '  
*mission*

'. This was her older sister who would normally tell her about her mission beforehand though so she could infer that it was a mission with some complicated circumstances.

"Well, nothing will come out of asking.....so, Jin? If you don't start speaking soon, we won't be able to do the inspection."

"\_\_"

"Eh? I can't hear you."

She could tell that Jin was talking from the corner of the living room based on his appearance but she couldn't hear his voice at all from the all-important communicator.

"Hey, onee-sa—"

"Ahh, that's right, I'sa-chan, be careful handling that. It has a really fragile component so it'll break if you bonk it a little."

"But then doesn't that mean it's unsuited to bring outside?"

"Right—. That's why the case is shockproof and the device is secured inside. You have to treat people and machines like looking after a cute child—"

"....."

She looked down timidly at the silver communicator sitting by her feet. A fragile communicator. She could only think of one reason that it wouldn't be

working.

.....Why is the corner of the box crumpled, I wonder?

Just now when she didn't know what this communicator was.

"

We were told to investigate this, but I don't even know what this is.

"

"

She kicked the edge of the machine and sighed.

"

"N-Nooooooooooooo!?! I didn't even try to kick it that hard!?"

"I'sa-chan!? Why are you shouting so loud?"

"Onee-sama, onee-sama, you idiot! I always ask you to tell me important information quickly without putting on airs——!"

Throwing aside the additional handset, I'sa scratched at her head and screamed.

## Part 5

Nightfall.

The setting set dyed the sky red was sinking below the distant horizon before she realized it.

".....The wind has become cool."

Kagura shook her shoulders because of the sudden gust that brushed against the base of her neck.

The heat haze that saturated the training grounds had disappeared at some point and the wind wrapping around her formal wear was as cold as her skin.

"Oi, Captain, isn't this a good time?"

"Yeah, let's stop here."

Monica agreed with Vaiel whose formal wear had become sand-colored like her own.

".....Everyone tried hard today."

She called over the floating machine pearl <Machina> and replayed images from the data it had collected.

The initial half of today's training had been long-distance trekking while carrying backpacks and the latter half had been unit battles in a three-man cell. The images machine pearl <Machina> had taken were mostly from the latter.

—The unit battle without Sheltis.

They had easily imagined that it would be a harsh battle but the results at the end had been two battles with two victories. Even if they had collected information on their opponents beforehand, it was an unexpected result.



"Vaiel worked twice as hard as usual. I was also able to take it easy."

".....We'd get lectured by the Instructor if we lost."

The person in question took off his sweat-soaked Iron Fist Protectors <Knuckle Dusters> and turned away. Behind him, Monica and Kagura exchanged looks and put on slight wry smiles.

.....But it's a good feeling.

What Monica lacked was confidence. That had improved with the gaining of experience and she'd even come to have the energy to head for the front lines by herself. Even Vaiel who always skipped was being obviously refined by participating in the training.

.....Even for me, instead of once every two days, now three out of every four days are for training.

Her research job was neglected with that but she had already passed this month's goal, so there was no problem.

In general, all members were certainly raising the standard of their strength.

"Sheltis is returning the morning of the day after tomorrow, right?"

"That's what I've heard."

What about it? — Monica had a question mark pop up in her head.

"No.....it's just that he didn't say anything like '

*I'll be going*

'. Even if it's just a day, he'll be leaving the unit. I thought it was unusual."

It wasn't like she was expecting an organizational formality where he would absolutely report when he would be leaving. It was simply that it was unexpected for the boy named Sheltis to not say "I'll be away" based on his personality.

"Are you not curious, Monica?"

"I think he should have a lot to think about because it's a big mission. ....Let's leave him alone."

She placed both parts of her crossed rods <Rosario> into her belt holders.

With her vibrant sakura-colored hair waving in the wind, Monica looked up at the sky.

"We can only wait for his return."

## Part 6

.....How long have I been like this?

A silent room.

Atop his desk, he had head laid atop his arms which were lying on the desk.

"

Sheltis, if you sleep like that, your bedhead will be horrible.

"

".....I'm not sleeping."

I'm just being a little absentminded. Muttering that within his heart, he raised his face.

"

But look, you really did get bed hair. Your bangs are pointing up.

"

"Nobody's gonna come anyway."

Nobody would come and he had decided not to go meet anybody.

"

Oh, you won't go and meet with Ymy? You'll be participating in an important plan starting tomorrow and she's also a member of it.....you can create a reason to meet.

"

"No, it's fine. For today and tomorrow."

It wasn't a heavy pressure on his back and shoulders, but a faint numbness at

the tips of his fingers and toes.

—The quality of nervousness is different from before.

He would infiltrate one of the third organization's bases and might be able to meet Igun-I again. Moreover, there was whether he would be able to hear a method which would remove the mateki nesting within him.

Then there was whether he would make it back to the floating continent <Orbie Clar> safely.

"It looks like I'm uncharacteristically nervous. That's why I don't want to meet her."

"

Because it might be conveyed to Ymy if you meet her now?

"

".....Maybe."

It wasn't like he didn't want to see her. He just had a feeling that he mustn't meet her.

"It's feels like a prayer or something? In order for me to give her a good report the next time we meet."

"Yet another unscientific"

"It's fine."

All the more so because he wanted to be closer to Ymy's side by even a little.

With a clear goal in mind, he wanted to suppress his uplifting feelings that much more.

".....It really is difficult to have our relationship stay like this."

"Do you mean Elbert Resonance?"

That was the rejection reaction created when extremely powerful shinryoku and mateki came in contact. Because of the barrier standing between Ymy and himself, he still couldn't touch her with even a finger.

".....I want to do something about it."

He was holding down his voice.

—I want to tell her sorry for keeping you waiting. I want to be told welcome back.

He was keeping Ymy waiting at the very top of the tower.

He had always had her worrying. For over a year, she didn't have a Sennenshi and that should have made her uneasy.

"At least.....I would like to report something happy."

Just a little more. Just how much would those words put Ymy at ease? I want to alleviate Ymy's worries. This is a prayer for that.

"

Then you should sleep soon. Since you've already decided you won't meet with her.

"

".....I can't sleep."

Replying like that in response to machine crystal <Ilis>' tone which seemed to have yielded, Sheltis turned back to and plopped down onto the desk.

## Part 7

"Sheltis, Sheltis, wake up. It's already six."

.....I don't remember sleeping.

When Sheltis woke up, there was one hour left to departure.

"How are you feeling?"

"Hm, I don't think there's any problem. It feels like my shoulders and thighs are a little stiff though."

"

Jeez—. That's why I told you to quit it with that weird posture and go to sleep.

"

"It'll fix itself while I walk."



Leaving machine crystal <Ilis> atop the bed, he took deep breaths while walking to the washroom. While staring at the splashes of cold water gushing out of the faucet—

".....Let's go."

He whispered that for himself to hear.

## **Part 8**

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, floor 65.

The running engine was making thunderous noise along with the propeller which was spinning at super speeds.

There were one, two extremely heavy airships advancing while warping the shock-absorbant tiles under the floor. Behind them was a technician maintaining the shock-absorbant tiles.

"

It sure is lively straight from the early morning, isn't ittt.

"

Machine crystal <Ilis> spoke in a voice that seemed to feel admiration.

The tower's internal airport — it was a floor supervised by the Mechanical Bureau and an area which was conspicuous even for the tower. Those moving around there were not clerks but mechanical technicians and they wore faded overalls instead of the suits worn by clerks.

"Oh, nii-chan, ain't you early. I admire you for coming here thirty minutes before we're supposed to meet up."

"No. I'm afraid he spent the entire night without sleeping."

Directly behind the Number Nine <Huick> who was folding his arms and carrying nothing was his female subordinate in a suit. The two executives of the Governmental Sector were boldly standing right at the center of the floor.

.....The remaining ones are Leon and Horn but it looks like they haven't come yet.

"Why are you two here?"

"Mm? That would be because this is the gathering location. Am I wrong?"

"Ah.....no, not that; this is the very center of the floor. Isn't it kind of hard to stay in the middle of such a large space? Those around would also be curious so I would stand near the edge."

"That's correct."

Kuro who was standing behind him agreed in a reserved tone.

"Even at the best of times, we are uninvited guests. However, Huick-sama quickly became interested in the airships.....and doesn't want to move from here."

"Yup, yup, I have a fondness for things like the special machinery of this hand or devices. Like this."

The Number Nine <Huick> looked up at the silver airship parked directly to his side.

"Nii-chan, have you ridden this?"

".....Umm, I don't think I have."

It was a different unit from the transport airships Guards usually rode. To begin with, the usual cylindrical body was even more cramped as if it had been squashed. The weight of the wings was also diminished so they were thin.

—Those are wings for cutting through the air rather than riding on air currents.

"I haven't seen this often either."

"I would think so. This is—"

"An exclusively designed special duty machine. A sound dampener is included in the wings and the coating is also used to lower radar response. It limits the crew to heighten speed and coverytness.....is the description. Unfortunately, it seems it's still in the midst of development."

A blond young man was making his way over across the airport with his pure white longcoat waving.

"This is the unit we'll be using for this mission. Have you already loaded your luggage?"

"

Not yet—. Everyone was in the middle of looking at it because it's an unusual airship.

"

"That would be it."

Leon glanced at the two from the Governmental Sector and Sheltis.

"It doesn't look like there's anybody carrying something that looks like luggage. That's convenient since it seems heavy luggage is limited due to this unit's delicate center of gravity. Now it just depends on Horn—"

"My luggage was loaded last night."

The female Sennenshi appeared with the echo of solid shoes on the ground. Hanging on her shoulder was a long-range rifle.

.....Me, Leon and Horn. And the two from the Governmental Sector.

.....With this, everyone's here.

"

How admirable of everybody to gather here fifteen minutes early. The only pity is that there's hardly anybody to send you off.

"

"Come to think of it, that's true. Especially in Leon's case."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Where's Syun-rei?"

When he went to the floating archipelago <Lagoon> with Leon last time, she had endured her morbid fear of people to come see him off. It was unexpected that she wouldn't show up.

"Syun-rei is with Ymy."

".....Ah, I see."

It was Syun-rei's job to monitor them at all times together with Ymy using clairvoyance. Judging from what Leon said, that mission had already begun.

"Hey, hey, you know, Kuro and I still happen to be executives of the Governmental Sector. Is it okay to be showing us a secret machine? Aren't we generous?"

"The day before yesterday, ane-ue and Meimel decided upon it."

Horn replied curtly.

"There are several reasons permission was granted but the Governmental Sector probably has similar technology anyway."

"Hohhh. Well, as you surmise.....I wonder if it's fine if I answer, Kuro?"

"It's your own responsibility; I said nothing."

"Hey, isn't that cruel!?"

"Putting that aside—"

She quickly turned her neck and looked away.

"Will be be embarking at the planned time? If so, we should be taking our seats about now."

"No, there was a communication from the one in charge from the Mechanical Bureau. It seems the pilot's preparations aren't complete yet. Something about yesterday's application being late."

"Oh boy. That could be a little worrying. It'll be fine if there's no incident or oversight because of a rush though."

Sheltis' eyes clouded over at Leon's response.

.....The plan itself is really sudden though.

"I also received a report that there was a support amongst the selected personnel for the pilots. I don't know if there's a correlation between that and the maintenance being late or not though."



Horn looked up at the airship pilots' room.

"Ohhh, a support? More specifically?"

"No idea. However, I heard that the pilot was recommended by someone '  
*above*

'. It's difficult to imagine it being ane-ue, so I thought Meimel had a hand in it."

Maybe she wasn't interested in the topic as Horn's tone was flat.

"At any rate, quick—"

"Eyri-neeeeeee, hurry, hurry! Over here—!"

It was then that the voice of a young child echoed throughout the airport.

.....Eyri-nee?

.....And that voice just now.

"Huh, I.....have a really bad feeling. That's strange, this should be a really important mission. The pilot coming should be a really skilled veteran as well."

"Mm? Skilled? Did you call for me?"

A figure drew closer while pushing a metal wheelbarrow.

The girl's large, cheerful-looking eyes and vibrant orange hair emphasized her liveliness.

She was wearing a plain short with machine oil-stained work overalls on top and had no glamour or make-up, but that actually suited this girl.

"Hey there—, Sheltis, morning. It's the arrival of an exemplary pilot."

She waved her hand casually in greeting.

".....Pilot."

"Mm, what're you suddenly holding your head for?"

"Uaaaaaaaaa, as I thouuuuuuught!? Why am I only right at times when I have a bad feeling? I'm worried before we even take off!?"

In front of Eyriey, Sheltis screamed out with all his heart.

"Ah, how rude, it's the best treatment for me to be the pilot."

"I kinda have this feeling that we crashed the last time you piloted an airship though!?"

"Muu—. That was an accident. I'll stop at emergency landing this time."

"An emergency landing is enough of an accident, isn't it!?"

.....I don't have the will to retort anymore.

.....Why is Eyriey working as a Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> pilot, I wonder. This can't have been Ymy's recommendation.

"The woman over there."

"Ah, yup, yup. You mean me?"

Eyriey turned around when Horn called her.

"You're the pilot?"

"Yup, I'm Eyriey, and I'm piloting this machine so best re-gards! Ah. By the way, this child here is the co-pilot."

"I'm Yuto—. .....Eyri-nee, what's a '  
*co-pilot*'?"

"My helper."

"Ah, is that it? Yuto will help Eyri-nee—"

"Good, good. Let's do our best together—, okay?"

The self-proclaimed pilots were having fun with their arms spread out. With that in front of them, the next one to move was the Number Nine <Huick>.

".....Hey, hey, hey, hey, missies, you're Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>'s pilots?"

The executive drew near Eyriey with his eyes narrowed to slits.

"Miss, I'm gonna confirm again but you're sure there's no mistake?"

"Yep, yep, best regards! I'll do my best!"

" ....."

After he stared at Eyriey's smiling face long enough to bore a hole in it.

"I see, you got me."

"Eh?"

Leaving Sheltis, who questioned that without thinking, as an outsider, for some reason, the person himself had a docile expression as he and his subordinate nodded at each other—

"Oi, Kuro, these guys are amazing. Pilots at their ages. I didn't expect there to be technicians like this at Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>."

"Yes. And to have been entrusted with this mission means that they have a considerable amount of trust."

".....You can't make light of them."

"It should be called praiseworthy."

The two Governmental Sector people were nodding at each other.

"No, I think you two are reading too deeply into this. Normally, people would have doubts."

.....It's Eyriey and Yuto after all.

He had worked together with them at The Two Swans <Albireo> for two years. At the least, he had confidence that the reason for their selection wasn't as deep as the two from the Governmental Sector believed.

But.

"What are you saying, Sheltis, you don't understand the meaning of this order?"

After the two from the Governmental Sector came Leon with a bold smile.

"What?"

"Look at how those Governmental Sector two are surprised. It was probably Meimel who gave the order to dumbfound our rival organization."

"

That's right, that's right—, I'll also be at ease if Eyriey comes along with us.

"

On top of that, even machine crystal <Ilis> was blinking in satisfaction.

"You're being fooled!? Isn't everybody making too many overestimations!?"

He said, but it didn't seem like anybody would listen.

"Right, Horn! You should be able to understand that there's definitely no deep meaning behind these two being pilots.....huh?"

At some point in time, Horn had disappeared. Just when he thought that and looked around—

"Being a pilot while still young is worthy of note. I'll give you this."

"Oyo? Th-This is.....Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>'s special candy which is limited to ten a day!? I-Is it really fine for me to have this ridiculously rare candy!"

"Uwaa—, thank you, onee-chan! Yuto really loves this!"

He had no idea where she'd gotten it from, but Horn was giving the two a limited-time candy which had a stick attached. Moreover, she was showing a rare smile in front of the happy two.



"At least doubt that they're pilots——!?"

With her having fallen so easily before him, he finally let out a shout.

.....Ahh, I see. I thought Horn liked the children at the orphanage.

.....It was that she likes kids in general.

"Sheltis, why are you so crestfallen?"

"Oi, oi, nii-chan, get it together."

"Sheltis-nii, are you okay? Are you feeling bad?"

Yuto looked up at him worriedly and hugged his leg.

"Ookay, then let's set off! Come on, Sheltis, cheer up!"

".....No, see, I.....was sure that somebody would oppose you guys.....but well.....if the others say it's fine.....it can't be helped anymore."

Sheltis also trudged after the line heading towards the airship boarding stairs.

## Part 9

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, floor 287.

".....The airship has taken off."

"

—It is now safely away from the tower. The passengers are the four of the main unit and one for the separate unit to make a total of five, as planned. There are two pilots.

"

Looking over the scene sent to her by Syun-rei, she was sending information via telepathy to several recipients at the same time.

".....Leon's drinking tea."

"Leon is drinking te — wait, that doesn't matter."

Lying down in her own room, Ymy had her eyes firmly shut.

.....This is difficult.

.....It's hard to decide how much of the information to convey.

Ymy was receiving information from Syun-rei's clairvoyance as-is. Putting that into words and conveying it well would allow Cadres Guard Ishtar's group to also view it with a territory-type shinryoku spell.

"

.....Leon is talking about something. It looks like he's enjoying himself.

"

"Umm, you know, Syun-rei, I'd be happy if you could tell me about the others besides Leon too."

".....Sorry."

The image she was being sent changed from a magnified view of Leon's face to bird's eye view which included Sheltis and the others who were in the

surroundings.

.....Though it can't be helped that this happened.

Pursuit with clairvoyance was, so to speak, like a scene shot with the spell caster's handheld camera. Who to set as the focal point and observe was entirely up to the caster. For example, in Syun-rei's case, she would focus on nothing but Leon and neglect the surroundings.

.....The last time we did this in practice, all that was shown was Leon's sleeping face for a whole evening.

.....Well, that's Syun-rei for you.

And.

"

Ah, look, it's urgent, Syun-rei. Leon just went to the changing room.

"

A telepathic message from Meimel echoed in her head.

".....Y-Yeah. He went."

"

Then rather than the passenger room just now, wouldn't it have been better to look over there? If you do it now, you can pass it off as a proper mission now, you know~~~?

"

".....!!!!!"

Syun-rei shrieked soundlessly.

**[T/N: Like when you scream so hard that it doesn't even actually come as sound.]**

"Me-i-me-!! We're being serious here, so please don't puzzle Syun-rei!"

"My, how mean of you~. Puzzling her.....I didn't say anything quite that great. Ah, Ran's calling. See you later!"

The voice ran away while leaving behind a snicker.

".....Ymy, it's Sheltis."

"Sheltis?"

The next moment. What was sent to Ymy's brain was the image of her childhood friend making his way to the changing room.

"!"

"

.....We could follow him with clairvoyance.

"

"Y-Y-Yo-You don't have to!? I, I-I-I.....I.....don't really.....have any i-interest in Sheltis getting changed!?"

After all, I watched Sheltis change long ago and that had been a given. ....W-Well, that was around ten years ago.

.....No.....that's.....

.....It can't be helped if I look for the sake of the mission.....I think. N-No, no, wait, hold up, me! As I thought, that's really not good!

"

.....Sheltis came out. He just removed his jacket.

"

".....He sets off false alarms."

She took a deep breath.

"It looks like I've fallen for him."

.....I have to forget about that for now. I won't be able to focus on the mission or training.

The only thing I can guess is that it's only something in Monica-senpai's heart and she hasn't confessed to Sheltis.

.....If she had, not even Sheltis would be able to act normally.

.....But Sheltis right now seems really calm.

"H-Hrm? By the way, Syun-rei? Can you look at the cockpit?"

The image being relayed moved from the passenger room to the cockpit.

There was no problem with Eyriey who was sitting in the center. Of course, it had been surprising that she was selected as the pilot but that was probably the work of Meimel.

The problem was to her side—

The area of the co-pilot's seat was wavering like a heat haze. But there was no way there was a heat haze in the airship. If so.....

"Hey, about that co-pilot's seat....."

"

.....Jamming. A separate shinryoku spell caster is acting.

"

Jamming, as I thought. The entirety of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> was covered in a weak barrier which prevented distant clairvoyance. But she remembered having broken through a similar barrier at the Governmental Sector's conference grounds with force.

.....But this is different.



.....It's a barrier strong enough to challenge Syun-rei?

"

.....It's an extremely polished spell. I wouldn't have noticed if I were lax.

"

"That much?"

It was not that Syun-rei was having a hard time; it was because it was Syun-rei that she realized her sense of discomfort.

If so, then if it had been her doing the clairvoyance, she might not even have had a sense of discomfort to the point of showing a heat haze. The co-pilot seat would be '

*simply empty*

' and she might not even know there was a barrier there.

To be able to do that, the individual would need to be a practitioner of the same Priestess-level. But why the co-pilot seat? Was there somebody who didn't want their existence known sitting there?

"I'll try asking Meimel later. I think it was probably Meimel who recommended Eyriey so she should also know who the co-pilot is."

".....Yeah."

"I'll continue the observation."

Ymy closed both her eyes, lay down on the bed and drew a breath.

## **Part 10**

Speed stable at supersonic levels.

Unit condition stable. Dispersing radar from a single detection radar via the unit's outer film.....success.

"Umm, this button is the thrust lever and this is for reverse. Fumu, fumu, and this screen here is the atmospheric pressure compensation figure."

".....Umm, Eyriey, what's that you're holding in your right hand?"

Without looking away from the important-looking information being

displayed on the monitor, she was turning over the pages in the heavy documents held in her hands.

"Ahh, these are the detailed design documents for this airship. It's different from the model I'm familiar with so I'm memorizing it while it's on auto-pilot."

".....I'd have liked for you to have memorized it before taking off if possible."

With his elbows on the backrest of the pilot seat, Sheltis' shoulders drooped.

"Hey, hey, Shel-nii! Look, Yuto's piloting—"

"Let's see.....wait, uwah! Eyriey, Eyriey, Yuto pulled off the control stick!?"

"Ah—. That's fine, I'm the one who removed it."

"What!?"

The person in question, Eyriey, still didn't avert her eyes from the detailed design documents.

"If the control stick were really attached to the unit, then Yuto's actions in the co-pilot seat would actually have an effect on the unit. If I remove it, that won't happen. It won't be found out if I just reattach it later."

"

I see, you have unparalleled development ability as always.

"

".....I'm worried."

However, the airship was actually flying in reality and there were no errors on displayed on the instrumentation so he was surprised.

"Eyriey, what's this "

1

' reaction on the detection radar over here?"

"Isn't that just the Governmental Sector's?"

Moving the stack of detailed design documents to her side, Eyriey removed the belt around her waist.

"Mm—.....sitting too long stiffens your body. The Governmental Sector's radar isn't some overblown thing. They predict the paths of airships flying around the floating archipelago <Lagoon> and inform the airships so they don't crash into each other."

"

I would think. Since Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> has a much more large-scale detection system.

"

"....."

"Oh? What's up, Sheltis-kun?"

Eyriey stood up and started doing stretching exercises.

"Well, it's nothing major. I just simply thought, '

*Ahh, so we're passing near the Governmental Sector right now'.*"

"Yup, yup. Rather, we'll be at our destination pretty soon. I received the path and location from the onii-san wearing a Governmental Sector hat so I just flew along that."

".....Is that so."

Proper pilots had been brushed aside and Eyriey was selected as the pilot. He had thought she had would have heard the summary of this time's mission.

"They wouldn't tell us either."

That was true of the location of the third organization's base as well as how they were planning to infiltrate. No matter how covert their secret military organization was, it was difficult to think they would burst in just like this.

"I was sure they would tell us soon too."

It had been several hours. If the Number Nine <Huick> had spoken to him, it was about silly small talk or questions about Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>.

.....Beyond that, has he already spoken with the Sennenshi or Priestesses?

.....At any rate, I won't know if I don't ask.

"Eyriey, I'm counting on you for the piloting."

Turning his back to the two in the pilot seats, he headed towards the passenger room.

"That was unexpectedly long."

An isolated room continued to the passenger room from the cockpit. On the other side of the mechanical door with an electronic lock was Leon waiting with his innerwear visible after having removed his white coat.

"How are the two pilots doing?"

"

Not bad—. I also confirmed from the monitor that the craft is stable. Eyriey is being thorough, reading through the detailed design documents instead of a unit piloting manual.

"

"It's fine to read but I'd like her to prioritize getting to the destination."

With his hand propped against the window frame, Leon smiled wryly.

"Those two from the Governmental Sector are waiting for you."

"For me?"

"After you return to the passenger room, they'll have a simple strategy meeting. In the first place, we haven't even heard about where we're headed."

"Ahh. Right, right. I was curious about that."

Not a word of the plan had been spoken even when the airship departed from the tower. This was the message from the Number Nine <Huick> that he'd heard through Meimel. It was a desperate measure taken because they didn't know where on the floating continent <Orbie Clar> the third organization's assassins could be hiding.

"That's just how much the Governmental Sector are also taking precautions against this third organization. The Lords of Unusual Books....."

*Golden*

' Maha and '

*Blank*

' Igun-I."



Golden <Maha> who obliterated a Regular Guard unit and Igun-I whose nature was still unknown. They didn't know who else was in the Lords of Unusual Books but there was no doubt that every single one was a dangerous opponent.

"He was a troublesome opponent, right?"

".....It inevitable even if I deny it; he was somebody for whom no amount of preparation was too much. I haven't seen him go all-out yet."

.....It's a frustrating conflict.

I'd like to avoid fighting with the Lords of Unusual Books as much as possible. But I can't draw out the information I want from Igun-I if I run away from the Lords of Unusual Books.

"It's been a while since you spoke of an opponent so highly."

"What about you, Leon?"

".....Me, huh."

The young man looked at his reflection in the window and took a deep breath.

"I don't know. I.....don't know if I'm tense."

"

My, how unusual. Fighting a strong enemy is also a part of training, is what I thought you'd say.

"

"It's because I'm making Syun-rei wait."

In a gentle — mild tone which gave no sense of harshness, Leon continued.

"Syun-rei was uneasy yesterday. It's not that she's lonely being separated from me but that I was participating in this operation."

"Umm.....you mean a foreboding?"

"Putting aside what to call it, I believe that Syun-rei is sharp in those kinds of things. It's different from shinryoku or precognition, something like a type of sense."

The young man's eyes which were gazing into the window were showing a color of stillness they would normally never show.

"I am still somebody in the midst of training. No matter the mission, I can't say something is absolute. ....That's why I always go forth with all my strength. Even more so if Syun-rei is worried about me."

.....Leon is the same as me.

.....Because I couldn't go to meet Ymy yesterday.

That was to say that these were opponents which warranted that much tension and unease. Whether what lay ahead would become their deathbeds or a means of survival, all of it would depend on them.

"But you're not planning on keeping her worrying, right?"

"Of course not."

"I thought you'd say that."

His response was firm as always and that was what made this man reliable above all.

"And you, if you want to get promoted already, don't screw up. Don't think you can stay as a Cadet Guard and keep Ymy waiting forever."

"Roger that."

He raised his hand with his reply.

"—Well then."

"Let's go."

Sheltis and Leon each spoke and then walked towards the passenger room.

## **Part 11**

"You're finally back. I got tired of waiting, you know?"

The Number Nine <Huick> sitting in the front-most seat narrowed his eyes to slits.

"Are you prepared?"

"I'm fine."

"Right then, then let's move to the serious talk. The nee-chan behind me stuck a gun to me telling me to start talking already."

The Governmental Sector elite pointed a finger at Horn who was sitting in the back seats and smiled wryly.

"If you know that, then maybe you should get talking?"

"Ohh, how scaryyy. Well then, let's get to the topic before I get shot by the scary nee-chan — Kuro."

He snapped his fingers.

And the woman sitting directly behind him stood up and made a small bow.

"First, I shall extend my thanks to you once again. It is heartening to have gained such reliable companions despite the suddenness of the suggestion. ....Onto the main matter, the base that we are seeking is one that I confirmed via Mikuva's Crimson Eye. It is located thirty kilometers south of the Governmental Sector on the floating archipelago <Lagoon>.

"At most thirty kilometers? That's within Governmental Sector airspace, and right under your noses at that."

Horn had her arms folded as she made a small sigh.

"Why didn't you realize until now?"

"It's a lack of confirmation and danger awareness predominant in old organizations, and wellll.....they're really stubborn."

The Number Nine <Huick> answered without hesitation.

"The location Kuro spoke of, the floating archipelago <Lagoon>, is an airspace of many islands grouped together. They're too small for agricultural plants and we haven't found any precious resources or ecosystems. In all honesty, it's just under the management of the Governmental Sector."

"

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> also has those kinds of islands. However, Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> has the walking observation unit known as Syun-rei. Meimel also constructs barriers so she would realize if there were any sloppy movements within the barrier.

"

The floating archipelago <Lagoon> which people could find no value in using.

For sure, it would be an ideal location for a third party looking for a headquarters.

"You know, sorry for poking at faults right now but what about routine patrols? The floating archipelago <Lagoon> being like that would make it a hotbed for crime so shouldn't you have security personnel going around?"

"As Sheltis-sama has surmised, there are routine patrols for the floating archipelago <Lagoon>. However....."

Kuro held out a single report.

The participants of the investigation, the supervisor, the writer of the document — and only the '

*issuer*

', Ran, written above that had many checkmarks in red ink.

"This is a concealed operation spearheaded by an individual bearing high-ranking authority. The possibility of the government member's secretary being someone from the side of the third organization arose. That he had personally gone for the inspection of the floating archipelago <Lagoon> and skillfully deceived the inspection team."

".....I get that much. Continue."

"Yes. The location we will be infiltrating is as I said. You can view the specifics of its location here. It is one of a great deal of the islands of the floating archipelago <Lagoon> crowded together."

**[T/N: Apparently each island is called Lagoon, and the entire thing together is also Lagoon. For consistency and because that doesn't really work out that well in English, it's going to have "islands" attached to some instances.]**

To Leon, Horn and himself. Kuro passed each of them a folded sheet of paper. Upon the white paper was a map printed only in black ink.



Amongst the many islands of the floating archipelago <Lagoon>, one was enclosed in a "O" in red ink.

"This is the final destination, tentatively named....."

*Plant*

', but we can't very well ride this airship directly there. No matter how covert the unit, there will be a considerable impact upon landing so it will become known that something has landed even if the airship itself isn't seen. With that—"

**[T/N: "Plant" written as "facility island"]**

She pointed at the map.

"We'll be infiltrating by crossing over these clustered islands of the floating archipelago <Lagoon>."

"Correct."

The Number Nine <Huick> raised the corners of his mouth while stifling a yawn.

"Mostly electricity-generating windmills are located on the floating archipelago <Lagoon>. Luckily, these islands are connected to each other by steel cables to form a wind farm. We've also confirmed that there are bridges

connecting each island. There are also islands which can be crossed from by simply jumping."

The plan to infiltrate Plant was just a matter of the number of islands neighboring it. They wouldn't have an difficulty finding a route with this many islands and it would be easy to evade detection from the third organization.

"Looking at it from their point of view, this island was chosen because there are any number of escape routes for immediate retreat. We're using that to infiltrate."

"Makes sense."

Nodding to the Number Nine <Huick>'s words, Sheltis held onto the edge of the map in his hand.

.....It'll be easy to return like this as well.

.....The conditions for the infiltration and return are much better than I expected.

"

Umm, the islands which are connected to Plant and seem easy to move from.....number at around five.

"

"Right. So we'll do the final confirmation on that. The main unit, us, will infiltrate Plant from the island to the top right. How about you?"

"The bottom left island."

The member of the separate unit, Horn, did not falter in her answer.

The island located to the top right of Plant and the island located to its lower left. The main unit and separate unit would infiltrate through their own paths from directly opposite sides.

"Okay, so we have no objections in the main unit. I'll take any other questions you have."

"I'd like to confirm whether there are any large carnivores which attack people or poisonous creatures. Also, I'd like to know the ground's stability."

"Neither will pose a hindrance to the main plan."

Kuro answered. She didn't have anything resembling documents in her hands so she must have done the pertinent research beforehand.

"The main lifeforms on this island are small birds and insects. Also, neither poisonous lifeforms which could affect humans nor carnivores have been sighted. As for the ground, investigation has shown it to be more or less the same as that of the floating continent <Orbie Clar>'s Living Districts. Will that suffice, Horn-sama?"

"Acknowledged. That will be all from me."

"Then our preparations are set. ....Now then, this would also be a good time to land the airship."

The Number Nine <Huick>'s mutter echoed throughout the passenger room.

"All that's left is a match of intelligence with the other side."

# Interlude - Ultramarine

.....Plip.

.....Pliplip.....

The water tank was filled with pale, light blue solution. Small bubbles were floating up and popping, floating up and being eliminated with a dry sound.

"Fufu.....ufufu....."

"Ahaa, haha.....hahaha."

Laughing was mixed in with the sound of air bubbles popping.

"Is that it? That airship."

"Yeah, that's it."

"I wonder if we should tell Igun-I."

"

Yeah, we should. But first we have to report this to Armadyl. Including the pilot, there are seven people?

"

"

Seven.....huh.....but that co-pilot seat catches my interest.

"

"

Yeah, I can see something blurry like a mirage. It's strange.

"

" ..... "

Suddenly, the children's laughter which had filled the room disappeared.

A silence spread gently. It was a raw, stinging silence that was born, almost like when a child is sulking.

"

Well, whatever. Igun-I is the expert for those things.

"

It was easily a minute by the time the cheery voice echoed out.

"

That's right, Igun-I is the expert. That's why we should tell Igun-I too.

"

"Yeah, so with that decided, we should get going."

Each of the voices that had been going around instantly went silent in order and then.

"This is a mass transmission to all Lords of Unusual Books ranks from '  
*Blue*

' Neue and '

*Green*

' Noesis.

Warning — assumed pattern 049 has been detected and the defense system has been activated. Preparations for interception underway."

The perfectly clear voices of the twins traveled through the interior of the facility as if they were singing.

# Chapter 3 - Chance Meeting and After

## Part 1

Tenketsu Palace, floor 274.

Taking a single step out of the elevator into this floor which was customized for the use of the second Sennenshi, everything from the floor to the ceiling would shine with a rusty blue color.

The rusty blue color was the unhidden color of metallic ground. The thousands of buffering plates and the airships' protective film were made of a special composite metal.

.....Creak!

Those buffering planes screeched as they sunk in. Footprints were gouged into the floor.

"Hmph!"

Stepping down with enough force to warp the buffering plates, she added her own body weight to that force and swung her fist. There was no target or goal; it simply cut through the air. But—

.....! **[T/N: A bunch of ツ were in between these indicating sounds that can't be mimicked.]**

The air which was split by the supersonic fist burst. The shockwave borne from a living being which has surpassed the speed of sound rent the air and roared with a sound akin to the cracking of a whip.

"So how is it going for them?"

The girl wiped the sweat trailing down her chin off. Though her clothes were light, consisting of shorts and a tank top, they absorbed her body's sweat and were currently soaked.

"As you heard."

Meimel smiled gently at her partner who continued to train in silence.

"But it might be hard to understand the finer points even if you're informed.

.....Speak of the devil, here's another report."



There was no need to turn her ears to the ceiling speakers.

"

Umm, it appears that the main unit and separate unit have split up. Ah, Sheltis, Leon and the two from the Governmental Sector have alighted from the airship. They've landed on the edge of the floating archipelago

.....and seem to be heading somewhere."

"It looks like they've split up. It looks like they're heading somewhere. ....It's hard on us to receive a report with so many '*like*'s."

Ran sat down where she was with a wry smile.

"It's troubling to have a vague report."

"Come now. Voices can't be heard using clairvoyance so they're trying their best to guess."

".....I feel like I'm trying to crack a code."

"It's not a code—, it's Ymy-speak. Though it's true you need to decipher it."

.....But today's on the better side.

.....I was prepared for the information to be more disorderly.

"By the way, Meimel, what about today's meeting?"

"I'm skipping out. I've also called off today's and tomorrow's Priestess training. Skipping practice once will mess with my condition but it can't be helped this time."

"So you're saying it's that important."

"Yes. After all—"

"After all?"

".....No, ignore that just now. It's nothing."

"I'm curious."

"It's nothing major, okay? Come on, you need to train yourself properly. I'll decipher the Ymy-speak for you."

She scolded Ran who was sitting on the ground and stood up. Looking sidelong at Ran who reluctantly resumed her training, Meimel gently placed a hand to her chest.

—After all, if we make a bad move, they might be wiped out.

Speaking in board game terms, it would be a mistake. It wouldn't have an immediate effect on the big picture but would manifest itself as great malice in the endgame.

.....Just going by the personnel selection, it's optimal.

.....But the opponents and their methods are completely unknown.

The Lords of Unusual Books. Those known were only "Golden" Maha and "Blank" Igun-I.

"To outwit your opponents, you must first deceive your allies."

"Nn? Did you say something?"

"Nope, no-thing at all."

Playing it off in a feigned manner, Meimel shrugged her shoulders.

## Part 2

.....Kii.....kiii.....

A small species of bird with vibrant yellow feathers, rarely seen on the floating continent , left behind an adorable chirp as it flew away.

"It is a bird which habitats this section of the floating archipelago . It is known to migrate to the Governmental Sector island before winter and back here after."

Kuro looked at the figure passing overhead and recited from memory.

"

Hehhh. I'm not well-acquainted with that kind of information so I'll keep it in mind. I have to input it.

"

".....That's fine, but don't forget something important by overwriting it."

Sheltis glanced at machine crystal which was swaying at his chest and followed after the two men in front of him.

### The Number Nine

was at the head, Leon was second, Sheltis was third and Kuro was at the end.

"But you know, it's humid, ain't itttt. Hey, Kuro, is this really the easiest route? It's humid and there are roots sticking out; this is rough for a walking environment."

"That's because this is the undeveloped floating archipelago ."

She said that smoothly and jumped lightly up to the top of a boulder blocking the path. Making such a casual jump while dressed in a black suit that fit her perfectly was truly resemblant of a black cat.

"My, what splendid carriage." [T/N: Alternatively, "bearing".]

"Well, she is my tag-along, you know? You can't call her a desk worker lacking in exercise."

Placing a hand on the brim of his cowboy hat, the Number Nine jumped over a tree root.

Rocky terrain.

There were countless ash brown rocks of varying sizes and giant trees were sticking out from the gaps between them. It was a more splendid sight than a forest. However, it seemed like it would cause one to trip over a tree root or rock if he or she wasn't paying attention.

"But you know, this is good weather. It makes me want to go fishing if I weren't on this pain-in-the-ass job."

The Number Nine

said that in a carefree tone.

"I wonder who the one who came up with that pain-in-the-ass job was."

".....I get it, I get it, so stop poking me in the back, Kuro."

"When this is over, I'll be requesting a special reward. Also, danger pay, overtime pay and holiday work pay."

"Righty, leave it to me, I'll pay you three times as much as you request."

"Even though you have no intention of paying."

Kuro puffed her cheeks slightly and crossed her arms. Looking at her from the corner of his eye, Sheltis called out to the Number Nine in front.

".....Say, about just now."

"Yeah? What's up, nii-chan, being so formal?"

"What was that that was mentioned just now? About you coming up with this job?"

"The first one in the Governmental Sector to realize the presence of the Lords of Unusual Books was Huick-sama and Huick-sama was the one who said, '*Then I'll go.*' when we were lacking information and came up with a plan to infiltrate the third organization's base."

He didn't answer, his subordinate did.

"At any rate, it's a mysterious enemy organization's base. If we couldn't find anybody to name themselves for the infiltration unit, then he would head for the enemy's territory himself.....what a headache."

"That's quite the resolution."

Whether out of commendation or surprise, Leon raised one eyebrow.

"Even in

Tenketsu Palace

, how we will deal with the third organization is still under deliberation. It's because there was a suggestion from the Governmental Sector that a just cause to mobilize the Sennenshi was formed — is what Meimel said."

"Are those words of praise?"

"The fact that Meimel went along with it means it was a good opportunity."

Leon's reply was blunt but its meaning was important.

"I agree. We'd have just played into the enemy's hands if we took it slow."

The fact that Golden and Igun-I attacked the Governmental Sector was more convincing evidence than anything else.

Attacking before their information could be read from Mikuva's Crimson Eye should have been their goal. However, in reality, the Number Nine , had pulled out that information beforehand.

"What's more, you planned to break in with just the two of you if the rest of us didn't come along?"

"I'm sensitive despite how I look."

While looking at the rocks underfoot.

"There are stiff elders and stubborn co-workers but I don't not like the current Governmental Sector. The meals are delicious and it's basically peaceful, and there are subordinates who do the work so I can even do my hobby, fishing."

".....My wages."

"But now there's a group that seems like it will utterly destroy that situation. It can't be helped that having those kinds of guys loitering around bugs me. That's why I'm going to confirm it. I don't know if I can completely unveil their plan but I can at least get a base."

The footsteps of the executive who was facing forward did not stop even temporarily.

"So how is it? We've actually come to look at the island. We'll be at our

destination shortly."

"

Me, me! I was imagining a narrow floating archipelago

island but it doesn't look like that now that we're on it.

"

"It should be just short of two kilometers across. At any rate.....and speak of the devil."

The Number Nine

climbed straight up a rock hill and folded his arms.

The glint in his eye became slightly sharper as he looked down — at the coast of the floating archipelago island opposite theirs, floating not even ten meters away.

.....That's it.

.....The Plant which is hiding the third organization's base.

"

My, that's amazing. It's close enough that it wouldn't be strange if rather than neighboring, they were touching.

"

"That's what I said. We can cross with just a little jump. By the way, the island the nee-chan in the separate unit chose is about the same."

Tap.

The Number Nine

kicked away the small pebbles at his feet and began doing stretches.

"The other coast is.....just under six meters away. The ground will crumble if we land right on the edge so it should be seven meters with allowance. Factoring in the headwind and side winds, it's nine meters. We'll jump using the fundamentals of long jumping. If you fail, it's free fall, but you'll end up on a direct course to death by even falling into the Garden of Corrupted Song ."

" ..... "

.....Falling to the Garden of Corrupted Song .

Looking down from the edge of the floating archipelago 's cliff, he could see the blue crystal ocean created by Hyouketsu Kyoukai down in the distance.

Squinting, he could even confirm black barriers swirling within.

—It's this close-by.

—People are living this close to the Garden of Corrupted Song .

"Ohh, what's up, nii-chan? Your lips are shut so tight together; are you bad at long jumps?"

".....I'll be fine. I can do it."

He clenched his fist so he wouldn't have to speak.

"Kuro? Can you do it?"

"My personal record for the long jump is 13.7 meters. That's with a suit and high heels."

"Ah— is that so? Then there's no problem.....well then."

The Number Nine

flicked the brim of his hat.

"Follow starting from those with resolve."

With a short approach run, he jumped towards the opposite coast and Sheltis followed after him once again.

## Part 3

The sea of trees was overgrown and dense.

Large trees with thick and rough trunks were lined up in the dark forest. There were many layers of strange vines or creepers wrapped around the trunks and the bugs on the thin ends were also mysterious.

".....Looks just like every other day."

Horn snorted and and looked away from the giant tree ahead of her.

Having gone on patrols of the Biotope with her older sister constantly, strange trees and mysterious bugs were common knowledge to her. She would not be surprised if she were to just keep up the minimum of caution.

"I'm twenty minutes behind the main unit. I think that should be just right?"

She had a long-range rifle slung over her left shoulder and her favored machine pistol in her right hand. Upon her hip were reserve magazines and a communicator.

—My mission is to aid the main unit.

She would sneak onto Plant via an alternate route from the main unit.

Afterwards, she would infiltrate the base some time after the main unit and group up with them if they had succeeded in safely stealing information. If the main unit became engaged in combat with the enemy, she would support them by following the instruction of Ymy who was observing.

.....At any rate, I have to sneak onto Plant and wait nearby the base.

.....After that, I wait for the main unit or Ymy's orders.

The minimal personnel was good for covert operations like this. She had heard that the combined unit's members were selected by Meimel but it was a splendid choice for the one left in charge of governing the tower by the Queen.

.....Now then.

"You remember what I said just before?"

"Of course. I'll remain on standby until I'm contacted by someone from the main unit or Horn-nee."

"Good job."

The airship's camouflage blended it in with the surrounding greenery. Horn made a large nod to Eyriey who was showing her face from the pilot's window.

"Add on one more thing to that. If you don't receive contact from any of us—"

"Yeah?"

"Return to

Tenketsu Palace

with just the two of you. There's no need to wait for us."

## Part 4

—A research facility.

The walls of the rectangular structure were grey. There were no windows and neither wiring nor plumbing was jutting out of the walls. The perfectly flat wall

was completely covered in moss and its singular green color seemed to blend it in with the surrounding forest.

"Leon, doesn't this look familiar?"

"Yeah. It looks like the other floating archipelago that other time.....is this some kind of joke?"

Leon, who was standing beside him, made a rare sigh.

"It's nothing strange.

Tenketsu Palace

also often sets up strata or environmental observation facilities like this."

Kuro surveyed the facility ahead and gently shook her head.

"In other words, it's the same as the other one

Tenketsu Palace

identified to us."

That was the origin of the conference between

Tenketsu Palace

and the Governmental Sector.

The unmanned research facility had been remodeled by the third organization. There had been a Yuugenshu breeding tank set up before but this one was being used as a base as-is.

"This was as much as Kuro saw using Mikuva's Crimson Eye. Both Kuro and I don't know the interior but they're somehow deceiving the regularly scheduled patrols."

".....I think it's underground."

Sheltis bit down on his lip at the Number Nine 's whisper.

".....If it's the exact same as before, that means they're below here."

He glared at the ground underfoot.

The aboveground research facility was just a fake and the real one was an underground floor made by extension. That's why it was meaningless no matter how many inferences were made while aboveground.

"Kuro."

"Yes. Sheltis-sama and Leon-sama, please step back."

Taking a step out front, Kuro took a yellow key out of her breast pocket. She



advanced directly to the central door like that. She soundlessly inserted the key into the rusted brass lock.

—.....Click.

Shortly after, the metal lock fell to the ground.

"Only one side can be opened. Just in case, don't stand in front of the doorway."

While also stepping aside herself, Kuro pulled on the door handle. The grating sound of rusted metal rubbing echoed.

.....Creak.

Only a dim space lay on the other side of the completely open door.

"Well, this is as expected."

The Number Nine

patted Kuro's shoulder with a slight wry smile. However he kept that act moderate and turned to them, pointing beyond the door.

"You've seen this once before, right? Wouldn't we be more familiar with the structure from ahead of here?"

"Ah, but I wasn't with Leon....."

The ones who were with Leon at that time were Eyriey and Yuto. The one who was acting together with him was Monica so the routes they'd taken to enter the research facility were different.

"I entered this way but I think Leon entered through a secret passageway. If I remember, a path continued underground and the it had to be unlocked from Leon's side."

"That's how it was. ....Shall we try it since I was told the release code by Eyriey?"

"In that case, I guess I'll go along too. Kuro, you stick here with nii-chan and do something like introduce yourself again if you like."

Following after Leon, the Number Nine also headed outside.

Only the two of them, he and Kuro who was a Governmental Sector executive, were left behind.

.....Self-introductions.

.....Come to think of it, besides her name and affiliation, I don't know anything about her.

"Why did you volunteer for this unit?"

"—Eh."

He leaked out a voice without thinking at her sudden whisper.

"Meimel-sama spearheaded this operation. Around you were only Priestesses and Sennenshi who outrank you. Amongst them, the first to raise their hand at Meimel's appeal was you."

Kuro swept aside her sidebangs which were a dark green nearing black. Her eyes reflected not a shred of emotion and only stared at him dispassionately.

"I know that the other day when Ymy-sama visited the Governmental Sector, your unit was assigned to travel together with her as her escorts. Did you volunteer because you view this mission as a continuation of that one?"

"No way. That's a different mission."

"Then why? You are a Cadet Guard. He may act like that, but Huick of the Governmental Sector also possesses authority equivalent to a Sennenshi of

Tenketsu Palace

. You should not possess power to silence those around you with the simple words '*Then let's have a look.*'"

It was a general rule that Cadet Guards would act like Cadet Guards and focus on training. For an outsider like her, his desire to participate in this mission was very unexpected.

"Am I wrong?"

".....Yeah, that's why I raised my hand first. Because I wanted to convey that I wanted to go."

"That you wanted to go? Neither a feeling of obligation nor responsibility, you truly personally wished to go?.....My apologies but I cannot think of any other reason for that beyond creating achievements."

A mora.

Inserting a wordless moment, she suddenly leaked a smile.

".....However, I can't see you being that kind of ambitious person. I cannot think of the reason you joined this mission."

I give up — he watched as she shrugged and jested.

"It's the same reason as Huick's."

"The same as Huick-sama's?"

"I can't let it slide. Somebody precious to me is in the tower and The Lords of Unusual Books are causing that person unrest so.....wouldn't it stand to reason

that I can't let it slide? That's why I'd like to settle this myself for that person."

"....."

She stared blankly at him.

"You, a Cadet Guard? You can't leave it up to the Sennenshi and Priestesses?"

".....That's right. I really do want to puff out my chest with pride."

His childhood friend had waited at the highest floor of the tower all this time.

In order for him to stand proudly before she who had continued to wait all alone, he wanted to bring closure to the matters of his mateki and the Garden of Corrupted Song .

"Is that strange?"

"Is that important person a woman?"

"Eh?"

"I think the woman you spoke of is definitely happy."

The Governmental Sector woman's appraising gaze softened and she nodded.

".....That would be nice."

"I would think so if I were her. After that, for you to return safe——!"

At the sudden tremor underfoot, Kuro crouched down.

.....Rumble, rumble.

The floorboards continued to vibrate slightly and a portion raised a sound, sinking into the ground. The surrounding floorboards folded up and headed underground.

"It's as was reported."

Kuro blinked as she looked down at the stairs wrapped in darkness which led underground.

"Yo, how's it going on that end?"

With Leon in tow, the Number Nine appeared from the doorway ahead of them. He walked to the middle of the room leisurely with his hand in his pocket, a carefree appearance.

"Oh, this is something."

"

It's as you see—. It really did have the same construction as the floating archipelago

from last time."

"Well that's a cause for celebration. ....I see, this really is quite something. I wonder just when they managed to perform such large-scale construction."

The Number Nine

lightly kicked the first step on the staircase and confirmed its feeling. Having decided it could be ventured, he nodded slightly and began walking with the same gait as always.

.....The same as before, huh.

While confirming the conditions of the Number Nine and Leon who were walking ahead of him, he also took care of the feeling from his feet as he went. There were no traps last time but that didn't mean there wouldn't be any this time.

"

It would be suspicious if the materials for the staircase were to change suddenly.

"

"It'll be great if the traps are so kind. ....It'd be best if there were no traps at all though."

Straining his eyes to stare at the ceiling, there was a dull setup with a thin metal plate stuck there. The wall to the side was also the same. It was also difficult to call the construction of the staircase neat.

"Sheltis."

With his back still turned, Leon suddenly called to him.

"We received a message from Horn not long ago. She said she'd also reached the island and was heading here."

"Got it. ....By the way, will she know about this place on her own?"

"She has a guide."

—Syun-rei and Ymy.

The two Priestesses were keeping constant watch over the main unit from back at the floating continent using clairvoyance. They knew the location of the research facility so they would convey that information to the separate unit.

.....As expected of them, we're this far out and still within their clairvoyance range.

Then.

"It looks like we'll get through this without fear of traps."

At the same time as those words, the figure of the Number Nine who was walking ahead disappeared.

"A corner?"

"It appears to be the destination."

A massive corridor that continued for who-knows-how-long.

.....It's different from the previous research facility.

At that time, they had come out to an enormous floor immediately after descending the stairs. He remembered there were fallen over computers, all in black, here and there and countless cables running underfoot. There was but a single one in this endlessly stretching corridor.

"This is.....quite the scale. I can't see the end."

The Number Nine

had passed the point of being tense and instead was speechless in amazement.

"

I believe this island's underground was gouged out to resemble an anthill.

"

".....That's quite the lightning fast construction."

The walls and floor were also of simplistic construction, covered only by grey metal plates. The electrical lines for the ceiling lights were also visible. If some shock were to sever the lines, the entire corridor's lighting would fall.

"

Now then, just how far does this passage continue?

"

"No idea. Well, let's just keep going without worrying about that. There's no such thing as being covert with a straight path. Let's just continue and hope we don't run into anybody."

The Number Nine

continued on with a gait that could be taken as carefree. But without having taken many steps, he suddenly half-turned his face in their direction.

"Kuro."

"Yes."

"Only worry about the back. I'd prefer not to get pincered in this kind of corridor."

"If for example——"

Interrupting the Number Nine 's words, Sheltis continued.

**"they come from the front?"**

"Not meeting them is ideal.....but it's impossible to hide in this kind of corridor. While praying we don't meet them, if we do, the first thing to think of is how to escape. We didn't come here to fight a battle. Though, I would like to get a bare minimum of information."

The Number Nine

spoke in a somewhat quiet voice.

"If the ones we run across are somatic cell organisms, then we should get information with the leading question and run away after that. The annoying case is if it's a fight lover who attacks without care for what we say, so if that happens——....."

Suddenly, the Number Nine closed his mouth partway through his words. Stop — his right hand which was held up horizontally wordlessly conveyed that.

"....."

He was glaring at the right hand-side wall ahead of them. He stared without blinking at that wall which was not even slightly different from the walls they'd passed thus far.

"You guys, **don't get discovered by this wall.**"

The Governmental Sector executive suddenly smiled fearlessly.

"What?"

"An active optical sensor. Do you know what an infrared diode and phototransistor are? They're basically light detectors."

".....Like an automatic door's sensor?"

"

That's a passive infrared sensor. This one's active so it's a little more troublesome.

"

Leon's expression distorted in doubt and he sighed.

In contrast, machine crystal continued in a matter-of-fact and quiet tone.

"

The majority of passive sensors are, if I had to say, limited to sensing a person's body heat. However, this active sensor will detect anything that interrupts the infrared rays, whether it be a person or clothing. ....But that's amazing.

"

"Mm?"

"

I would have pointed out that infrared sensor if you had kept going a little longer without noticing it. You did well to notice it yourself.

"

"Even if I'm like this, I'm sensitive, you see."

The Number Nine

indicated a small crack with his chin. It was a fissure little more than a few centimetres. So an optical device was buried in the shadow of that.

".....They're good. The construction looks old-fashioned but if you unmask it, that's a high-end optical sensor trap."

Leon muttered in a very quiet voice as he clenched his fists.

"It seems to be the type of stronghold we're not good with. Sheltis, did you notice?"

".....Unfortunately, it's outside my field of specialty."

At

Tenketsu Palace

, this was the kind of thing that spies rather than Guards would learn. Or possibly, Kagura who was deeply knowledgeable about mechanics would have seen through it.

"No excuses like *'It's my first time encountering this.'*"

With both hands and knees against the floor, the Number Nine advanced in a posture that was basically crawling. After him went Leon and then Sheltis.

Around ten metres.

Sometimes they would crawl, sometimes they would sidle along the wall and other times they would jump to slip past the optical sensors.

".....Phew. For the time being, the trap area is done. Right?"

"

Yes. There are no responses on my sensors for the time being.

"

"That's great. But here's something difficult again."

Having cleared the section of the corridor covered in sensors, the Number Nine folded his arms.

"Left or right, which do you guys wanna go down?"

The corridor split in two.

After having passed through such a heavily trapped area, both of them probably lead to important areas.

"If we're gonna check both, then we might as well start with the right."

"That was quick. Well then, respecting Sennenshi-sama's opinion—"

"That's no good—. We won't let you go, you know?"

"Yup, we won't let you."

Two similar voices.

It wasn't through an amplifier, it was like they were directly echoing in their heads.

"

Amazing, amazing, you got through the optical sensors.

"

"

Yup. As expected, they were poor quality so they didn't help. Even though we told Natraja so much that sensors were unnecessary with us here.

"

Ahahaha – shrill echoing laughter.

".....What's this, are these guys"

"

That's right, hat-wearing onii-chan. We've been watching you since you were



closing in on an airship.

"

"Yup, we were watching. Since that's our job."

"I see, I see.....I'll praise you for not calling me an oji-san, but didn't anybody teach you that peeping is a bad hobby?"

## The Number Nine

openly warped his expression and clicked his tongue.

"You've been watching us since we got on the airship and came? There's no way brats can pull off that kind of clairvoyance and telepathy. Who are you?"

"Ah. That's right, Neue, let's do our *"self-introductions"*."

"Okay. Let's do them. Igun-I also said that it's *"good manners"* to name yourself."

.....Igun-I.

The twins inadvertently spoke that name. That meant that these twins were also one of them.

"I am Neue. Number six of the Lords of Unusual Books, '*Blue*' Neue."

"I am Noesis. Number five of the Lords of Unusual Books, '*Green*' Noesis."

""*Four intruders detected, now capturing.*""

.....Zuu.....zuzuuuu.

A gigantic mass shook a section of the corridor. It slowly edged nearer.

"To the right!?"

In an instant, Leon detected that shadow and went on guard.

To the right side of the forked corridor — the first thing that appeared was a massive steel-colored object that filled the corridor.

"Placing a mechanical soldier in this cramped hallway.....do they not mind a section of it being destroyed?"

The female executive shook her head in amazement.

It was a mechanical soldier with four legs protected by black armor. Its right hand was a shield and its left hand tapered off and it itself was transformed into a gigantic machine gun.

.....It resembles the one I saw back in the Governmental Sector's Sanctuary!?

It was still fresh in his mind. Protected by that hefty armor and shinryoku spells, it was an opponent he couldn't deal sufficient damage to with his twin swords.

"

Ehehe, we know about the dual sword user onii-chan. Igun-I told us.

"

"

You don't match up well with this, right? Its armor is very—

"

"Doesn't matter."

The flash of a sword cut off Neue and Noesis' laughs.

—Shinggg.

The great sword was swung in a straight line from ceiling to floor. The sword tip which was swung very quickly and very easily made a light sound as it touched the floor.

Following that was the sound of something solid cracking. That sound came from the mechanical soldier they had just seen coming to attack them.

Ksh.....sh.....kshhh.....

As the sound gradually grew, the web of fissures in the mechanical soldier's head armor stretched out.

"Well done."

"It's nothing major enough to be praised for."

Leon had his sword pierced into the ground.

"It only took one strike anyway."

Behind him. With its central machinery in the head destroyed through its armor, the mechanical soldier fell over face-up with a thunderous noise.

"Phewww! As expected of a Priestess' escort, huh, Kuro?"

"Yes. I didn't think there was anybody other than Zeadoll-sama would could render that kind of heavily armored mechanical soldier powerless in one strike."

The Number Nine

whistled and clapped.

"Waah, that was amazing, Noesis. Did you see?"

"

Yeah, it was amazing, Neue. He beat it so quickly. Natraja told us to 'buy enough time for a shower' but it's not happening.

"

"

I wonder who's stronger between this great sword onii-san and Armadel?

"

"Eh—. That would be Armadel."

The twins whispered to each other and laughed.

"You can't go back anymore."

"

Yeah, you can't go back anymore. Come out, virtuals.

"

Immediately after.

The wall in the direction they'd come from collapsed, creating a gigantic hole.

—Zaa.....zazaa.....

Perfectly orderly, countless footsteps came from the hole.

Virtuals, could that mean?

"Maha!?"

Sheltis was the first to react to the robed spellcaster that appeared in the corridor.

These clones that he had met with in the Nature District and the Governmental Sector were unforgettable. Each one was a monster capable of destroying Regular Guard units from

Tenketsu Palace

.

.....Maha's clones to the rear. If another mechanical soldier appears ahead of us, we'll be boxed in!

.....In that case, which way is better!?

"Run!"

He instinctively chose the right passageway that the mechanical soldier had appeared from and started running. Just by sensing their presences, he could tell that the Number Nine and Kuro were behind him with Leon in the back.

.....The more important the location, the more severe the security should be.

.....In that case, the logical choice is the passage that the mechanical soldier

appeared from.

"Sheesh, what a cautious lot. Is that him? Is that the Lord of Unusual Books called Maha?"

The Number Nine

spat that out with disdain.

"That was a clone. But.....the clone I fought at the Nature District had a much nastier strength than that big mechanical soldier."

"That's not very appealing. But that's just how serious they are."

Donning only a smile, the Number Nine accelerated.

"Change of plans. We only intended to look around and head back but we're being watched by those twins. You guys, we're gonna bust into the deepest part of this base by force."

"No objections here."

"I was planning on doing that from the start."

"Only if I get danger pay, overtime pay and a special bonus."

"—You guys aren't a bad party for one formed out-of-nowhere."

The Number Nine

's voice grew lively as he looked over the corridor.

About 20 meters ahead. Small autonomous soldiers appeared from both branches of the next fork in the road. Each one had a shotgun, a tazer or other varieties of guns.

"

I believe they're standalone. Shall we go around them?

" **[T/N: Standalone as in independent units (no control).]**

"Nahhh, we can just force our way through."

The Number Nine

declared that with razor-like thin chakrams held between his fingers.

"It's a battle of obstinance from this point on."

## Part 5

Tenketsu Palace

, floor 287.

"Sheltis!?"

Ymy sprung up from the bed she was lying on, raising her upper body.

"Syun-rei, just what's going on?"

Just when she thought Sheltis and the others had come to a stop in the corridor, a giant mechanical soldier suddenly appeared from further in. Though Leon cut it down with a single slash, the four people weren't relieved and dashed off in a hurry.

.....Is there a warning bell going off over there?

.....If so, were they discovered by the enemy?

There was no sound accompanying the image sent by Syun-rei. Even if a warning bell was set off or somebody's voice was coming from speakers, but as they were confirming it through clairvoyance, they could do nothing but speculate.

But she understood that Sheltis' expression was completely different from just a while ago.

".....Shinryoku detected."

Syun-rei's tiny, transient voice.

"Shinryoku?"

"

.....I don't know.....but.....this might be.....long-range.....tele.....pathy....., being.....used.....there.....

"

"H-Huh? Syun-rei, your voice is too quiet—"

The telepathy from her was getting quieter very quickly. No, it's not that her voice was getting quieter. Is this noise? It's like having a conversation in the middle of a storm.

".....Inter.....ference....."

Interference. Faster than Ymy could understand the meaning of that word.

"

.....Ah—ah—..... Ahh, finally the detection succeeded.

"

"

.....Noie, I'm tired, that was a lot of work. When we decided to put together this complicated spell when we only knew that it was somebody from

Tenketsu Palace

, this was mostly expected."

—Eh?

A voice that she had never heard cut in on Syun-rei's telepathy.

"I think so too. It's probably a Priestess."

"

Yeah, the Priestesses are suspect. Since they managed to resist our layered

interference. Even amongst the Priestesses, it has to be one specialized in shinryoku spells.

"

This voice.....?

She had never heard it before. But it definitely said that its detection succeeded just now. Could it be that these two had detected Syun-rei's clairvoyance and tracked it back to here?

"

Hello, unknown Priestess. We'll get straight to the point: we won't let you view what happens beyond this.

"

"

Yeah, we won't let you. We have lots of precious, precious secrets. Natraja said we can't allow clairvoyance. So we'll be forcibly cutting you off~?

"

—Zap.

"Ouch!"

Her body bent backwards from the intense pain that ran through her ears.

".....Ah.....What.....happened?"

She gripped the bedsheets with force and settled her breathing. I can't hear.....the telepathy. I also can't see the clairvoyance images that Syun-rei was sending at all.

"Syun-rei, are you okay!?"

".....Yeah."

It was a frail voice that sounded like it was squeezed out from deep within her throat.

".....The clairvoyance was detected and severed. A barrier similar to Tenketsu Palace's was erected."

"Then those children's voices just now?"

"

.....Those were probably their shinryoku spellcasters. Before they identified us, I severed their telepathy forcefully.....though it's not guaranteed.

"

It was a sudden and difficult to believe story.



—They're on par with Syun-rei in territory-type spells?

She didn't know the opponents' ages, but judging from the feel of their voices, they were fairly young children. They might be five or six years younger than them.

".....It was an unknown spell."

"They said '

*layered interference*

' just now, didn't they?"

Priestesses also used combined spells between multiple people. For example,  
"

*Triple Chained Chant*

" would be representative but she had never heard of an interference technique like that.

—Was it a spell that was developed in complete isolation from

Tenketsu Palace

?

"What about clairvoyance?"

"

.....If we try, it'll probably just be detected and severed again. It might end with our identities being detected this time too.

"

".....I see."

Was this impatience or frustration? Pressed by the emotions coming to a boil, Ymy clenched her molars.

With this, the method to confirm Sheltis and the others' safeties has disappeared. On the other hand, based on the voices from just now, they third organization should have recognized the presence of intruders.

.....I have to think.

The main unit should also be waiting for information from

Tenketsu Palace

now that things had gotten to this.

But they couldn't use telepathy which was essential. If they were intercepted like just now, then they would end up having the information used against them instead.

"

.....I think we can only contact them via

Tenketsu Palace

's hidden lines."

Not through telepathy but communicators.

If I'm right, Cadres Guard Ishtar should have a communicator that's connected to Horn from the separate unit.

".....What should we do?"

"Syun-rei, report to Meimel. I'll go speak with Ishtar-san!"

Springing off the bed, Ymy left her room and ran down the hall.

## Part 6

Autonomous mechanical soldiers were piled up high in the corridor.

All of them had the voltage unit in their chests destroyed and showed not a hint of movement.

"This side's done. How about you?"

"Looks okay. They've been completely rendered powerless."

Not taking his eyes off the autonomous mechanical soldiers underfoot, Sheltis moved only his neck to answer Leon.

"

Sheltis has eight units and Leon has nine. Thus, Leon wins.

"

"Of course."

".....No, the enemies just happened to be more concentrated near Leon."

He responded with a pout. With that expression still on, he patted his jacket; there was nothing like a wound. Leon hadn't taken a single gunshot to his white longcoat, so it was important.

"Any injuries?"

"Totally fine."

—Snap.

Kuro elegantly closed her iron fan.

Weaving her way around him and Leon, she was the one who made sure the mechanical soldiers they left behind were crushed for sure. It seemed she was proficient in martial arts, particularly the flexible and agile varieties. Even if shot at from behind, she could dodge by bending her upper body nearly 180 degrees without a problem.

.....She's strong too, as expected.

.....But this is the one I still don't understand that well.

"Dear, oh dear, I broke a sweat."

"I believe that Huick-sama was furthest in the back and had the easiest time."

"I was the one who beat the first one, you know? Though it's the truth that looking at you guys, I thought I could take it easy."

Looking sidelong at his subordinate, the superior shrugged.

This man had defeated a unit right at the start by throwing a chakram and then fell back and devoted himself to giving instructions. Though his skill could be glimpsed, he would not reveal the full extent of it.

"Roughly 75 seconds.....that's how long it took to defeat them. Not bad but the security robots prowling in others places should have been contacted. We're gettin' outta here before they come."

Follow me — He signaled that wordlessly with his eyes and ran off.

"The voices have disappeared."

"Mm?"

"The twin voices from just now. Even though we made this much of a ruckus,

we haven't heard a peep from them since they called out Maha or whatever's clones."

Leon whispered that in a such a hushed tone that it was almost only audible to him.

".....I wonder if something happened."

"

You mean something happened that caused them to lose the leeway of maintaining the telepathy? Judging from just now, there's also the possibility that they lost interest in us.

"

.....It really is intriguing.

.....Even though we're proceeding further into the base, it's completely silent.

"Huick-sama, behind us!"

In the middle of his thoughts, the warning cry from Kuro who was running at the back cut off his talk with Leon.

Around the corner they had come from. The hooded spellcasters appeared from there. In addition, there was a large beast probably created with the Golden Hexahedral spells.

"They caught up!?"

"That battle just now ate up time. Hurry up. If we end up fighting them, it'll take all day."

Holding down his cattleman hat so it wouldn't fly off, the Number Nine sped up. It was an all-out sprint with no checking for traps, only devoted to putting distance between them and the enemy behind.

".....Shall I be a decoy?"

"Moron, don't be having such dark thoughts. If somebody gets caught and turned into a hostage, it'll only spell trouble."

Scolding Kuro who had pulled out her iron fan, the superior sped up even more. Rounding the corner, they ran dozens of floors down in stairs, deeper and deeper — towards the innermost depths.

At that time, there was a change in the composition of the walls.

It had been just makeshift walls of iron plates but now it was made of thick and solid stone. The ceiling lighting was large and embedded and the flooring was a crimson carpet.

".....It's sure gotten spiffy."

A sense of tension was mixed into the Number Nine 's voice.

That was a given considering how radically different the construction was until now. Even the air was heavy, as befitting the depths of a base.

—The pressure is heavy to the point that it's hard to breathe.

Finally.

".....So this is the last one, huh."

Without dropping speed, the Number Nine gazed ahead.

A large corridor split into three.

All the corridors up to here had had only two choices, left or right. This one added a path straight ahead for a total of three splits.

So far, they had stayed together as four and gone down only one path.

.....But..... This is.....

"——"

Everyone was silent. That was because they all understood without words. That this was where the party would split.

.....They're here.

.....Beyond this corridor is someone from the third organization.

A heavy pressure could be felt from within even if they tried to ignore it. It wasn't one or two people. This presence was of three people. Each of them was waiting ahead of the one of the three passages.

Then.

"I'm going straight."

Leon was the first to move.

"Sheltis."

"Then.....I'm heading right."

Hearing that, the female executive opened her mouth.

"Huick-sama, that means we are"

"To the left. Not bad. Rather than dragging our feet here, let's just do it decisively."



With something akin to curiosity visible in his eyes, he led Kuro and turned to the left.

"The limit is two hours. Everybody is to return to the airship by that time. Just to get this out there, I'm not waiting for you if you're late by a minute or even a second!"

"This will only take an hour."

".....Same."

Opposite of the Number Nine

, he headed right. Nodding towards Leon who was pushing forward through the center, Sheltis took a breath.

"Ilis."

"

Constructing the dual swords' blades — fixing a silver monad as the core, coating it in Hyouketsu Kyoukai's azure crystals. Destruction limit set to sevenfold.

"

From the dual blades that were just hilts stretched a silver line, and shining azure wrapped around that to form the body of the swords.

"

I will focus on maintaining the blades in silent mode. Be careful.

"

The blue radiance of the crystal faded to gray. It was machine crystal  
' automated setting. When they knew ahead of time that combat against a powerful opponent was inevitable, she would limit her functions to audio recording only and concentrate all excess computational power to maintaining and repairing the dual swords.

".....Thank you."

There was no response from machine crystal . Of course, this conversation was recorded but as long as he did not order the release of silent mode, she would not speak.

.....I know.

.....Both machine crystal and I know who lies ahead of this division.

"

If you want to know, chase me. Now then, Sheltis, please chase me. That will be the beginning of everything.

"

We're talking about those Lords of Unusual Books. It should be simple for them to sense which path I have chosen and get there ahead of time.

That's why——

".....You're there, aren't you."

Ahead of the corridor he was running down at full speed, he could see the exit shining brilliantly.

## **Part 7**

The lighting shined blue.

In addition to the ceiling made in the image of a blue sky, there were idols, impressions and carvings treated with precious metals like brass and silver. There were even antiques like a pipe organ.

"It's a chapel."

"A giant hall, huh. To think there's a place like this underground."

The Number Nine

had his eyes stolen away by the gaudy scene and stood still for a moment.

"But you know.....it's kinda, you know."

He scratched his head through the hat.

"So the one who invited me was you, excessively glamorous red-haired miss?"

"Oh. So you've finally decided to speak?"

Directly in front with the idols, bewitching lips curved up into a thin smile.

She was sitting calmly upon the pedestal which was raised one level above the floor. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties. She had a voluptuous bust and a waist so thin it looked like it would snap which swelled out again to form her hipline — the one-piece she wore looked like it was cut straight from a mould of her and brought out her bewitching figure to an excessive degree.

"By the way, ain't where you're sitting for those religious scriptures?"

"Oh, is that so?"

She stared fixedly at the spot she'd chosen to sit.

"I don't have any interest in these things, you see. It just caught my fancy because the design looks refined."

*Chapun.* The red wine in the glass the woman held jumped.

"I like alcohol and men. But I don't care for the weak ones. I like them strong." Heehee — she placed a finger to her bewitching lips and smiled sweetly while wriggling around.

That devilish beauty lined up together with one other feature, her long hair. It was a red devoid of any discoloration. The very wavy crimson hair made one think of a fire burning paired against her white skin.

"So then, have you had enough looking around? One of the executives of the secret military organization, '*Heaven's Wheel*', Huick and his subordinate, Kurosan."

"Unfortunately, that's only getting started."

.....Oh boy, our information's totally leaking here.

He hid his expression with the hat worn low over his eyes and sighed slightly.

"How about we go about it together? I'd gladly welcome a beauty like you."

"My, how kind. But.....it seems I've strayed from my goal a little."

"Hm?"

"I wanted to shock you more. A member of '*Heaven's Wheel*' coming here alone is a confidential affair and investigating it was a lot of work, you know?"

What a pity — she shrugged her shoulders exaggeratedly as if to say that.

"There are two basic patterns to when people get shaken up. They either stay

quiet to prevent getting swept up in the confusion or they suddenly get really talkative to cover up that they're shaken. ....However, you did neither. Even though this is enemy territory and you have no idea who I am while I know exactly who you are, you're even calmer on the contrary. You're quite the experienced one, aren't you?"

"So you're saying I'm one of those strong men you like."

".....Yes. That's exactly it."

The instant she let a full smile spread across her face — the wine's surface burst into high-rising flames with a plip.

"That's why I will be your opponent. I just happened to be bored."

Leaving the flaming wine glass atop the pedestal, she jumped down.

"Sacrement executive of the '*True Scarlet*'

Number two of the Lords of Unusual Books, '*Scarlet*' Natraja.....shall we start our fun?"

Part 7

.....The start.

The start was an omen that couldn't even be called instinct. It had been felt since stepping in the base.....no, it had been since stepping on this floating archipelago .

Somebody absurd is here.

Somebody absurdly powerful is here on this floating archipelago .

That premonition was swelling with every second and every minute, and finally became a conviction after coming here.

Left, middle and right.

Within the corridor that forked into three paths. Each of them had a bizarre sensation about it. And he had chosen this middle path out of all of them because of this presence seeping out.

—The air of intimidation was anomalous to the point of freezing one's spine. A baby wouldn't feel it. Not even a child, adult or Cadet Guard of the Tower would realize it.

But for a Regular Guard.....they would lose the nerve to fight and even an Elite Guard would have the notion of running come to the forefront. But what about himself?

".....I'm shaking, huh."

It might have been tension or fear, or possibly excitement. Rebuking himself for having his arm shake while wielding his greatsword, Leon continued down the dark passageway.

And finally, he came to see light.

Within that, the figure of a man with golden hair was the first to come into view.

.....That's the man.

In the face of the pressure which rose explosively, his cheeks were dripping sweat even just by walking closer.

"Blue and Green gave me a report. They said it was an intruder."

A low sound echoed from within the light.

.....From my opponent?

Unexpectedly, the one who spoke was the man in the light.

"—is what I would say normally. I can't make such small talk. After all, this is the Sennenshi Leon Nestorius Ova himself."

"....."

He wasn't really surprised that his identity had been discovered. Putting aside Huick from the Governmental Sector and Sheltis, he was the partner of a Priestess. His face and name were known across the floating continent and if his face had been described by those twins, Blue and Green, it would be a given for his identity to be found out.

"The greatsword user of the floating continent . .....I see. Although we have not met, I have heard that you possess skill which does that name justice. Splendid, that is all the more reason——"

He passed through the corridor and ring of light in response to the voice.  
A battle of stone mats.

In the center stood a greatsword user with lustrous blond hair.

"Number one of the Lords of Unusual Books, '*Silver*' Armadel. I shall face you."  
The light in his eyes made one think of a sharp blade.

His tall body that would be prominent even at a distance was honed like steel and his muscled, manly build was visible even over the gray coat he wore. He looked more mature than his age with gallant, handsome features.

The greatsword user's looks would make any woman turn back to look at him.

"....."

Leon knew this man better than anybody else.

Their faces and physiques were completely the same.

The only difference was that Leon had silver hair and this man had blond.

.....

.....No, way.....?

He tried to suppress his shock but couldn't. That was also another first for him.

Yes. Looking almost exactly like himself—

".....Arma.....del.....?"

Was his brother who should be dead.

## Part 8

A light and sweet citrus scent.

A sweetness like that of just the right amount of powdered sugar and a pleasant sourness.....lemon pie? He had a memory of Ymy baking one long ago. She failed the first time and had her face painted black, but because of the frustration, she practiced making it many times over and it became her specialty cake in the end.

.....It smells like that time.

.....But why am I remembering that now?

"You're totally daydreaming."

"!"

With those words, Sheltis instantly prepared the swords in his hands.

.....That's right.

.....The moment he entered the room, he'd been hit by a strange nostalgia. It might have been hypnosis or illusions. His consciousness had been blown away by something unknown.

"Your eyes were gazing into thin air. Did you perhaps remember something nostalgic?"

A very tiny study.

In the room which was obviously small in comparison to the gigantic corridor, a black shadow stood at the window.

.....It's a strange room.

There's a window despite this being underground and there's an endless grassland beyond the window.

"But it's also enjoyable watching you like that. I've seen something unexpected about you."

The young man with a black hat worn low over his eyes smiled with a chuckle. A pitch black suit and pitch black boots, with a pitch black hat. Amongst the colors dominated by black, the pale blond hair swaying beneath the hat was the only thing eye-catching.

"Igun-I....."

"Yes."

"I didn't come for that kind of conversation."

He held up the sword in his right hand and thrust it forward. He closed in yet one more step to the Lord of Unusual Books who wouldn't lose his calm smile no matter what.

"I'm glad."

"\_\_\_\_?"

"You remembered my name."

As if he wasn't even paying attention to the hostility aimed at him, the all-black Lord of Unusual Books put a hand to his chest and respectfully bowed.

"Then I shall introduce myself once more. I am the Lords of Unusual Books assistant, Igun-I."

".....Assistant?"

"An apprentice. I only joined this organization a year ago so I haven't been assigned a proper rank yet. At any rate, the Lords of Unusual Books are set to six people so unless the '*top*' thins out, there won't be a rank or anything. Are you surprised?"

.....This man is an assistant.

A man entrusted with infiltrating into the Governmental Sector and contacting Mikuva's Crimson Eye is an assistant?

"But I'm actually enjoying my current circumstances. '*The seventh that should*



*not be*'. The '*Blank*' with no assigned rank — no other rank would suit me better."

The Lord of Unusual Books traced his finger along the window frame.

"Hey, Sheltis, don't you agree?"

"The seventh tone color arrives before twilight.

The two keys which form the world. That is to say the Seventh Heaven Rhythm and Seventh True Rhythm ."

"!?"

"That's a nice reaction. Unease and suspicion, nervousness and vigor are mixed into that expression..... It's a nice expression."

"Why do you—"

Putting aside the Seventh Heaven Rhythm , one of the Lords of Unusual Books who has no connection to

Tenketsu Palace

shouldn't know about the Seventh True Rhythm .

"About me, about your mateki, about the Seventh True Rhythm . You have too many questions so you don't know where to start. That's what it appears to be — but that's fine."

Igun-I spread his hands and seemed to be looking up to the sky as he continued.

"I shall tell you everything. About the truth you wish for and that which you don't, everything in its entirety. That's why I'm here."

"....."

"Oh? Why are you staying silent?"

Sheltis had deliberately not relaxed himself in front of the Lord of Unusual Books telling him this as if singing.

".....I have no interest in your identity. But for now, I need to hear your goal at the least."

He needed to learn what his goal was in joining the third organization a year ago.

Why is he so fixated on me and why is he willing to come out about that information on his own?

"Do you like poisonous strawberries?"

At first, he couldn't understand the meaning of Igun-I's words, much less the goal.

".....Poisonous?"

"Let's split a strawberry cake between you and Ymy. Amongst the many strawberries is a single one with deadly poison that will kill you if you eat it. You know where the poisonous strawberry is but Ymy doesn't even know it exists. Now what would you do?"

".....I'd just get rid of the poisonous strawberry."

"That's no good. The poisonous strawberry must also be eaten in this case."

".....What..... That's stupid."

"Would you eat the poisonous strawberry first yourself before Ymy does? Or would you split it half and half and both die?"

"....."

I can't read the intentions of this man before me.

.....I can't believe he's asking me for my response to such an unreasonable question.

"There's no way.....I could answer that!"

"Is that so? Then on the contrary, let's give the answer to your first question. My goal is to get your '*answer*' to the question from just now. Your will, your decision. The proof that your love for me alone exists and will answer."

Sway. Right after hazes appeared at Igun-I's hands, two hook-like swords were gripped in both.

Swords.....and a dual wielder like me.

"Yes, let's practice for your sake. For this day which is to come. Now then—"

"I am Blank.

The colorless color, the color of a forgotten past gone by.

So Sheltis, dye me in your color.

More dearly than red.

More distinct than blue.

More magnificent than green.

More elegant than yellow.

Purer than white.

I wish.....for you to dye me in the brilliance of the night's twilight.

So I can be at your side, so you can't forget me.  
In return, I will dye you in my blank color.  
.....Even if it runs counter to the law of the world.  
.....This is how much I think of you. That's why.  
I shall carve you full of wounds so you can't forget me this time."

## Part 9

She laid back on the pilot seat which was reclined to the limit.  
Occasionally turning over during her afternoon nap atop the impromptu bed,  
and occasionally turning over again. That had repeated itself how many times  
now.

"Hmm..... Everyone's sure taking their time. Even though they said they'd be  
back quickly."

She spread her hands wide and stretched her stiff shoulders. Using the  
reactionary force from that, Eyriey lifted her upper body up.

—It's already been three hours.

After letting Sheltis and crew off on another island, she'd let Horn off on this  
island and gone on standby. It had already been three hours since then.

However, the problem was that she couldn't judge whether three hours was a  
long time or a short time in this situation.

".....They didn't give me a time limit or anything, after all."

She didn't hear it from Sheltis but it seemed that they were breaking into some  
organization's base somewhere on the floating archipelago this time. Thanks to  
the conversation that Shasa had transmitted with telepathy on the Tower's  
269th floor, she had a rough grasp of what was going on.

But.....how long does an infiltration take?

She couldn't even come up with an appropriate estimate as a non-Guard.

Would it take a whole day or just an hour?

.....It's already past three in the evening.

"No, no, wait a second, hold up. They said they'd be back before tonight.

.....From here to

Tenketsu Palace

would be about five hours, wouldn't it? So it wouldn't be odd if everybody came back right now, right?"

Even so, nobody had come. Moreover, even though they should have communicators, nobody had sent in a report to now.

What was assured were the words Horn left behind when she went.

"If you don't receive contact from any of us—"

"Return to

Tenketsu Palace

with just the two of you. There's no need to wait for us."

".....I have a bad feeling."

There was the fact that she wasn't informed about the details but what she didn't like more was how casually she'd said "There's no need to wait for us".

This doesn't sit well with me.

Shasa had been the same when she'd first met her as well, but it felt like there were a lot of people that were self-sacrificing or didn't wanted to be minded.

"That's..... That's not how friends are."

Especially now, they were in the floating archipelago far from the floating continent . If she were to leave on her own, that would mean leaving everybody stuck on this island.

"Alright, I've decided! I'll stick here to the bitter end! With that in mind, it's time to eat snacks in preparation for this protracted battle! Come on, Yuto, you should also eat..... Huh?"

She had thought it was strangely quiet but the copilot seat next to her was completely empty.

"Yuto..... Huh, Yuto? Oiii, if you want to play hide-and-seek, say that to start with—"

Her shoulder was patted from behind the pilot chair.

"Wha?"

"Coming to some conclusion on your own and shouting by yourself, you seem to be having fun."

Brushing aside the jet black hair over her ear, the woman smiled. I know her — she had noble and maturity beyond her years, as well as a voluptuous body that couldn't be hidden by her pitch black vestment.

"Hm, mm? .....Aren't you Tsali-san?"

She was an acquaintance of both Shasa and Yuto. They'd only met once at The Two Swans but she striking enough to at least have her name stick.

"Why are you on this ship? would make this go fast. I'm your guard."

"Guard?"

Being told that, the first thing that came to mind was Shasa's face.

"

You need not worry about your safety. I will have a trustworthy partner accompany you.

"

"So please take Yuto along with you, Eyriey."

"You didn't really think Yuto was your guard or something, right?"

"Eh, no..... It's more like I totally forgot about that partner stuff."

She scratched the back of her head and smiled wryly.

"Because Sheltis and Leon are here, I was relaxed and forgot about the talk of a guard."

"I see, so Eyri-nee just acted as usual."

Eyri-nee. Using the same way of calling her as Yuto, Tsali laughed a little.

"Eh? But wait a second! So Shasa really did attach a guard to me? And that's you, Tsali-san!?"

"I just told you that was the case."

"Oh, ohhhhhhhh!? That's kinda cool, it feels like I've become a Priestess! A

guard will always be by my side..... By my side.....?"

"Is something the matter, my protege?"

Tsali leaned over the back of the pilot seat and looked down at her. Eyriey looked up fixedly at her eyes from her position in the pilot seat.

"Tsali-san, are you amazing?"

"I'm amazing and strong. To the point that Shasa asked me '  
*Are you really human?*  
' with shock."

"Guarding means you'll protect me no matter where I am?"

"Of course."

"Then—"

.....Whoa, whoa, that was close, too close.

She managed to frantically stop her mouth from running without thinking. Deep breaths, deep breaths..... Okay, I can't be panicking like that.

"Did you need something?"

"Well, I'd like you to search the island with me."

"—Hmm? Search this island, huh."

Tsali blinked with her eyes narrowed in enjoyment. It resembled a parent welcoming her child who scored full points on a test.

"If you're making that request of your guard, then there's no reason to refuse."

"Really!? Then I'll get ready right now. Also, I have to invite Yuto along as well."

"Ahh, if it's about her, then she's sleeping in the nap room. She said she'd be secluding herself in the back."



"Heh?"

The nap room. There was a room called that but she heard that it didn't see much use and was basically relegated as a storage room.

"Seasickness. It seems she was just enduring it but it was hard so she went to rest. Just let her be for a while."

"Ehhh, Was she seasick while we were piloting..... I didn't realize at all. Was Yuto okay?"

"She seems to be just fine now. Putting that aside, are you ready?"

"Ah, yeah. I'll be fine with just this one bag."

She had a single backpack slung over her back. Inside were handmade crime prevention goods and communication goods, as well as candy and juice which were packed in to the limit.

"Now then, let's set off! .....Wait."

Even after she'd gone to the passenger room from the pilot room, the all-important Tsali just stayed behind and kept staring at her.

"By the way, there was one thing I wanted to ask. Is this something that you have to go that far for?"

"Yeah?"

"Going out to search is to confirm the safety of those who haven't returned, right?"

She bluntly stated what was within Eyriey's heart.

"You were told to wait by those same people. The model response would be '*waiting until there's contact*', wouldn't it?"

"Mm—..... But this much time has passed. It really does concern me."

"Aren't you worried about yourself?"

"I do—"

In contrast with Tsali who was looking over fixedly, Eyriey's response was made with a smile.

"That's why I'm so relieved that you're here. Shasa-chan relies on you so I think I'll be able to really rely on you too. This way, I can search for my friends without second thoughts, so I'm relieved."

"....."

Tsali kept silent. After a little while.

".....Shasa's attached."

A sigh that seemed amazed and philosophical leaked from her lips.

"Is that bad?"

"Bad or not, I only asked out of personal interest. At any rate, I won't speak out against you going to search the island. Be at ease, I'm an excellent guard."

"Ohhh!? Alright, if that's settled, then let's go!"

Eyriey faced her assenting guard and pointed out the window, then ran to the passenger room exit.

Behind her—

".....Haa, as expected, I can't beat Eyri-nee. She really treasures her friends. What a dazzling person."

".....That's why Yuto loves Eyri-nee."

That faint sigh went unnoticed.

# Chapter 4 - Now We Meet

## Part 1

The smell of dirt and grass. The sound of insects, cries of birds and the rustling of leaves produced by the wind sweeping over the floating archipelago <Lagoon>.

—There's no real difference from patrolling the Biotope.

In the shade of a large tree, Horn looked down at the electronic display of her watch.

".....Thirty minutes have passed. No scheduled reports from the main unit."

She muttered in a mechanical tone and stood up from the bushes around the many trees. She repositioned her rifle leaning against her shoulder and bitterly bit down on her lip.

—Something happened. No, something else happened in addition.

She had received a report from Leon thirty minutes ago that they were infiltrating the base. The regular scheduled reports had stopped immediately after that. Even if it was called a report though, it was just pressing a button on the communicator to  
*'confirm you're alive'.*

That's not coming.

And it wasn't just Leon, there was no signal from Sheltis or the Number Nine <Huick> of the Governmental Sector. But even hypothetically, could a unit containing a Sennenshi and executive of the Governmental Sector be wiped out this quickly?

—What comes to mind is that they're in the midst of responding to an assault.

"They were either all separated or surrounded....."

At any rate, there was no way anything good was happening.

Another source of worry was that there were no instructions from the Priestesses. The one watching over them via clairvoyance was Syun-rei so if anything happened to Leon, she would have reported it straight away.

.....That hasn't happened. So the situation isn't bad?

The two possibilities were contrasting. Which one is true? Which one should I trust in as I move?

"——It is unavoidable."

She started moving again after having come to a stop.

Horn had come to the conclusion that she had to link up with the main unit. If the circumstances were good, then it would just end at her having made a meaningless trip. However, if something happened at the enemy base, her not going to support them could be a fatal mistake.

Unease was still within her heart but even then she would believe in her choice and head towards the base that Leon reported—

"....."

Immediately afterwards, the abnormality that surfaced on her thigh made her doubt her eyes.

".....Blood?"

The section of her camouflaged suit at her thigh was cleanly severed and was being dyed red with the spreading blood. It wasn't from a tree branch or scraping against a rock. It was a clean cut like that of a sharp blade.

.....When was I wounded?

.....Was it just now or was I already wounded when I was walking around the floating archipelago <Lagoon>?

No. This is not a wound from the floating archipelago <Lagoon>'s environment. It is obviously man-made. Also, if I was wounded like this on the way, there's no way I wouldn't notice.

So it was just now?

"\_\_\_\_"

Without removing her blinder, she maintained a watch over the future shown by her

*'Celestial Map Drawing'*

. Within the future that was only a few moments ahead, if she were to perceive the slightest thing out of place, she should be able to react at least



minimally.

Nothing stood out in the view of Celestial Map Drawing. Large trees surrounded her and she was right next to the thickets. This floating archipelago <Lagoon> was devoid of any dangerous lifeforms so it could be said there was not a single thing to watch out for. Nothing was out of place in the surroundings.....

—Click.

—Shiver.

The tiny mechanical sound Horn heard made her jump directly to the side in an instant. Though nothing stood out in her vision, she trusted her instinct and kicked at the ground.

"!?"

She felt

*'something'*

pass near her shoulder. At the same time, the camouflaged cloth there was torn up, and blood shot out from beneath it. Whatever passed by kept going and pierced through a tree's trunk behind her, leaving behind a hole like a needle.

"A sniper at close range!"

She threw aside her rifle and drew a machine pistol with her right hand, then she tumbled to the ground and moved deeper into the bushes.

—I could confirm neither the round nor the sniper but there's no doubt.

—It was a snipe performed with an accurate understanding of my position.

Concealing herself within the shrubbery even more, she didn't stay in that location for even a second before dashing into the sea of trees. A split second later, the spot she was at was sniped.

".....Do they want to have a shootout with me?"

She put aside figuring out why she couldn't see the bullet with Celestial Map Drawing. No matter what, finding the sniper's location took priority. Otherwise this one-sided defensive would continue.

Then.

Suddenly, the sniping came to a halt.

"I'm surprised you would just show yourself so easily."

A thin figure stood within a clearing in the sea of trees which was sparsely populated by flowers.

"....."

A dead tree.

That was Horn's first impression upon seeing the man before her.

He was as tall as was standard for men but he was unusually thin. His muscles and fat were trimmed to the limit — no, they were trimmed beyond the limit. Standing upright in a camouflaged suit, he resembled the sea of trees around them.

"Or are you surrendering?"

"....."

The man did not answer. As the camouflaged suit drew up over his head, neither his expression nor even his line of sight could be verified.

.....That was quite the magical-looking gun.

In the man's right hand was a rifle and in his left was a small automatic pistol. Both were white streaked with grey and various places such as the magazines and muzzle had protrusions.

.....That was quite the magical paint job on his gun.

In the man's right hand was a rifle and his in left was a small automatic pistol. Both of them where white with grey paint overtop and bumps in various places like the magazine and mouth. That design was reminiscent of nature and the bones of animals.

"So you're from the third organization. I'd heard about you guys but how delightful of you to aim at a woman from behind. Is that to show off your lack of confidence?"

".....Is that.....all.....you've got?"

"Did you say something?"

"Unable.....to.....even.....figure.....out.....where I.....was and.....being hit.....by such a.....slow bullet..... Is that all you've got?.....Sennenshi....."

His voice was a low bass like a person's groans had been converted into words. However, the scorn mixed into it was clear to Horn.

"Are you this headquarters' guard?"

".....This is personal. ....Since I finally found.....a.....kindred spirit....."

He lifted the arm holding his gun high into the air and declared with that voice which seemed to be fading.

"Executive of the Sacrements of the 'True Darkest Grey'. Fourth of the Lords of Unusual Books, Beltoma.....the.....'Dark Grey'....."

"It's upsetting that you would one-sidedly decide we're kindred spirits. I have other things to do."

Horn put her hand to her blinder and tore it off forcefully.

"I'm in a hurry so I'll only charge you for the clothing fee."

## Part 2

The '*Chapel*' floor.

Flames — the phenomenon that appears together with intense heat and light when matter burns. Even amongst burnable matter, combustion of gases, especially oxygen, are overwhelmingly numerous.

".....I dabbled a little in science when I was a brat."

Not bothering to wipe the sweat off his cheek, Huick glared at the phenomenon before him.

It was not a cold sweat. It was caused by the oppressive heat swirling in the surroundings.

"It didn't help jack squat."

"Oh my? Now why might that be?"

Snicker, snicker.

Natraja stood upon the Chapel's altar with a bewitching expression upon her face. Gazing lovingly upon the pillar billowing behind her, she poured flames and wine of the same color into her empty glass.

"The flames I know are all good children that obey the laws of physics, you see."

"Oh, how mean of you. That makes it sound like my flames are naughty rascals. Though it did in fact take a lot of effort to tame them."

A flame lit at the tip of the finger she stuck out into the air. The swaying flame gradually grew in size, giving off more intense heat and light and becoming a swirling flame.

"That's one really domesticated flame."

.....It's a shinryoku art. The classification is the common manifestation type.

Whereas Hyouketsu Kyoukai manifests "ice", that one manifested "flames".

"It's the same trick as Zeadoll-sama's Absolute Sanctuary arts, isn't it."



Kuro spread the iron fan she took out from her pocket.

.....Well, that's right.

.....It's a common art.

Natraja's art itself was unlikely to be difficult.

Just like Hyouketsu Kyoukai's ice crystals which are "matter which does not exist in this world", the vaguely defined matter that Huick materializes, "something that's hard, firm and translucent", is much more difficult to execute. Something like flames is easy to imagine.

But——

"That kinda crazy burning will turn this Chapel into ashes."

"It's fine. I'll just request for the repair fees from the Governmental Sector."

The flames around the Lord of Unusual Books weren't dying down at all. The flames which were touching the ceiling of the Chapel gave off sparks and grew

even more heated.

".....What a walking disaster."

The metal decorations that should have been atop the altar had melted due to the heat. Being able to pull out this amount of firepower freely and at a moment's notice.

—is not a matter of the difficulty or anything like that at all.

—The pinnacle. That single word.

"! Huick-sama!"

He jumped backwards at the same time as Kuro's warning. The crimson wave of flames licked at the tip of his nose. Afterwards, he crouched and leaped to the side. He bypassed the wave of flames and headed for the practitioner.

But.

"You're a little too slow."

The moment Natraja's lips moved charmingly, a wall of flames partitioning her from them rose up from her feet.

"Nah, this is just the right distance."

"Moving."

Kuro ran up from beside him and plunged into the towering wall of flames. She jumped without slowing down and swung down the iron fans in her hands against the crimson wall.

"Hah!"

The iron fans easily cut away at the scorching wall of flames.

".....!?"

The Lord of Unusual Books' face was dyed with surprise. Following that, a chakram was thrown. With just a strong flick of the wrist, the circular blade severed the cup in Natraja's hand from the base.

"Wahhh, so you can do something!"

A high-pitched cheer echoed through the Chapel.

"The iron fans were swept down at supersonic speeds and created a shockwave. That shockwave shook the atmosphere and cut through my flames — you predicted that much and used the instant the flames were down to throw a hidden weapon at me. Both of those are the work of a master."

"I am terribly pleased by your praise. Though that should be my line. You saw right through what happened..... You have good eyes."

"I happen to like shiny things."

Left and right, the Lord of Unusual Books winked with a chakram between the fingers of each of her hands.

The left hand's chakram was the one that cut through the glass. The right one thrown by Huick was lined up with the first. Even if the first one was dodged or stopped, the second one would tear into the enemy. But the real shot that was aimed at her shoulder was also stopped just as easily.

"Hmmm? Looking closely, this second one is a ring narrower and thinner. That makes it hard to spot."

The Lord of Unusual Books was taking a more detailed look at the chakrams.

"Don't stare at them so hard. The trick's going to be exposed."

"Oh, my apologies. Come to think of it, I've heard something about this. Huick of "Heaven's Wheel" is an intelligence agent. Accomplished in infiltration and causing disturbances, he is also a top-class hidden weapon user."

.....Information leaked again.

He didn't even feel like hiding his wry smile. Just which idiot talked about his info?

"An esteemed old man from the Governmental Sector. It looks like they were trying to boast about somebody in the same organization."

".....Those old fools, it's about time for them."

"Say, I've already gotten the information I wanted so can I retire now?"

So that's it.

"So you're the spy that snuck into the Governmental Sector."

He had already expected that a secretary for one of the parliament members, with their high clearance which included control over the regular patrols to this Plant, was part of the third organization.

.....Of all things, it had to be a Lord of Unusual Books in person.

"If I didn't know about that, I might have nicked myself catching these."

—Crack.

The chakram held between the woman's fingers cracked. Made of hardened ceramic, it should crack under some superficial pressure.

".....You're joking. I'm speechless."

"Oh, but that's my life."

The woman ground the fractured chakram beneath her boot but never once took her eyes off them.

"The members of 'Heaven's Wheel' use an amount of weapons that match with their nicknames. ....So, Huick the 'Ninth',

**how many hidden weapons can you use at once?"**

With a roar, Natraja's flames became even more fierce.

"Not enough, not enough. Not enough, not enough, not enough. This isn't enough at all. There's no meaning in my coming here. Allow me to show you just how fearsome the number two of the Lords of Unusual Books is——"

Crawling her fingers along her own nape, she let out a hot sigh.

A devilish charm and madness were reflected within her eyes.

"My flames will become much, much, much, much stronger. If you don't get serious, you might just turn into cinders?"

# Part 3

A coincidental resemblance.

There are people who resemble each other despite sharing neither bloodline nor environment. He had not a shred of intent of denying that.

.....However, this.

.....Can this be explained away with just that?

"\_\_\_\_\_"

Just once, Leon cast a gaze of doubt upon the man before him.

This man resembled him not just in height and face, but also in bone structure and right down to the way his muscles connected. Even his name, Armadel, was the same as Leon's brother's. ....Could such a thing be a coincidence?

"What is it?"

".....Do you recognize me?"



"What a strange thing to ask. Leon Nestorius Ova, one of the Sennenshi partnered to a Priestess. It is less likely that anybody within Orbie Clar does not know of you."

There was no hesitation within Armadel's voice. There was not a fragment of him hiding something or having come to a realization.

"That's not what I meant."

"What is it?"

"Do you.....have any personal recollection of my face?"

He was the reason I picked up a sword. He was the reason I decided to become strong.

If my brother wasn't there, I wouldn't have entered Sophia. I would never have met Syun-rei, Sheltis or Ymy either.

"How expected to be asked such a thing by a Sennenshi as soon as we meet."

Putting those words up first, the blond greatsword user gave a slight, strained laugh.

"I remember hearing talk from my allies that there's a Sennenshi whose face greatly resembles my own. I've heard that I resemble others many times."

"I'll just ask one thing."

He spoke before Armadel could answer.

"What about your family and siblings?"

"I have none."

".....I'll change my question. What were you doing before you joined the Lords of Unusual Books?"

"I don't remember."

What a barefaced lie. He's just saying that to dodge the question, right? Just before Leon decided that — the next line caused him to lose his words.

"I have not a trace of memory from before I came here. I heard from the doctor in charge of me that I had collapsed from grave wounds but I don't remember that myself."

".....Amnesia?"

"It seems to be something of that sort. But it doesn't matter to me now."

The worst answer.

.....No, I certainly did consider this possibility over the years.

There's no way that brother of mine would die. Then the reason he didn't come back must be because he was in critical condition or something else.

"Is that all you wanted to ask?"

"Yeah."

Leon stayed the indignation against this world's harshness within himself and continued his words indifferently.

"I had an older brother. His name was also Armadel and he also used a greatsword. Just like you.....he looked just like me."

"....."

"I don't know if you really are him. ....No, that's a lie. Within my mind, I've already come to the conclusion that you're most likely him. However——"

He glared at the greatsword user head-on.

"I doubt that matters to you right now."

"Of course."

Armadel's response was quick.

"Even if you set me up as your older brother, it's just sudden and without proof from my point of view. There's no proof beyond 'resemblance'. It might even be a trap to turn an enemy into an ally."

Such a short reason but that explanation was a given. In his shoes, Leon wouldn't be able to assent so easily either.

".....I get it."

"So what will you do?"

"I will just follow my ideals."

He lifted the greatsword he'd had held downward and directed its tip toward his opponent's chest.

"Let's have a match. If I win, I'll drag you back to the tower and have you undergo treatment from a specialist whether you like it or not. You have no complaints in that case, right?"

".....Now you're making sense."

It was the first smile the man before him had made. Just like Leon, the man lifted his greatsword that was on standby and pointed it at the opponent's chest.

"Transfer me

, Igun-I."

"What?"

After a short while, an man's androgynous voice echoed from the arena's stone tiles.

*'.....How sudden. And I just got to a good point with Sheltis.'*

"It'll be a problem if the intruder gets rowdy here. The twins are on break."

*'Okay, okay. Honestly, you slave driver. The same place as always, right?'*

"Yeah."

*'Then I'll transfer you. Pardon the dizziness.'*

At the same time as the voice disappeared.

— [Wyrđ] —

**[T/N: Blank Song]**

A glowing ring of light appeared out of thin air. It was neither red nor blue nor

white: a transparent door with no colour to speak of.

".....What's this?"

The door of light that appeared in the air rapidly increased its brilliance. From candlelight to standard electrical lights to the sun and even beyond—

"!"

He reflexively closed his eyes from the pain frying his eyes.

.....?

".....Wind?"

The first change he felt was the refreshing, balmy breeze stroking his hair. This breeze could never occur underground in an airtight sealed chamber.

The feeling beneath his feet was also that of earth. It was no longer the hard floor he'd felt until just before this.

——This.

"What kind of magic trick is this?"

He pointed at the great roaring waterfall behind him. The waterfall was flowing down from a distant cliff edge. He could feel the splashes from it against his face and hear the grand roar of water falling. It was not an illusion and he could not see it as something man-made.

"Your senses are correct."

"What?"

"It's real. This isn't the Lagoon you went to anymore. I don't know if it's Orbie Clar's nature district or the Biotope though."

.....Impossible.

It took several hours in a supersonic airship to reach that Lagoon and we arrived in Orbie Clar in an instant?

"It's a guy called Igun-I's secret art. He seems to just use it freely but the man



himself says that it has much more 'constraints' than even Maha's Hexagon."

".....Well, whatever."

There's no point in worrying about the truth about this art right now. What I should do —— is face this man. Everything else is an idle thought. I doubt I have a chance if I don't focus on it at least that much.

.....Maybe I should be happy about this?

The man I've chased all these years is my opponent.

It's a miracle to have my goal standing before me once again.

.....Have I.

.....Have I managed to reach my goal?

He lifted his sword above his head and held his stance. The destination of his incessant effort. The meaning behind his polished sword skills. The absolute rank he climbed to within the tower. Dreaming of the time all of it would come together, he came this far.

That's why—

"Let's do this."

Leon ran towards the man before him.

## Part 4

Bathed in the bright lighting.

Repeatedly descending the endless emergency stairs in the tower. And ascending them.

.....Just how long have I been running?

"Haa.....ah.....!"

Ymy put her hands against the wall and leaned on them, forming an angle with her body as she repeatedly took deep breaths.

"Ishtar-san, where did you go at a time like this?"

Ishtar should have the communicator which connects to the detached unit. But she couldn't be found anywhere. Asking Meimel had only resulted in the repeated response of "You don't have to worry about her."

.....Ishtar-san is in charge of staying in contact.

.....But this isn't working. Too much time has passed. I should head back to Syun-rei.

To reach floor 287 where Syun-rei is waiting, the Priestess-exclusive elevator is the fastest. She turned her quivering feet towards the exclusive elevator which should be in the northern part of every floor—

*'.....Leon!?'*

Syun-rei's voice filled with surprise suddenly came in through telepathy.

*'.....I found Leon!'*

"Eh?"

Before Ymy could process Syun-rei's words, images from Syun-rei's clairvoyance were transferred.

—A ravine?

Against a backdrop of a waterfall kicking up a spray of water, two greatsword users were engaged in a back-and-forth battle. One of them — the silver-haired swordsman in a white coat was certainly the Leon Ymy knew.

"Ehh. But telepathy was being blocked just now. Did you break through it?"

*'.....This isn't Lagoon.'*

"B-but I can clearly see it from clairvoyance."

*'.....It's Orbie Clar's nature district. The clairvoyance marking I had on Leon suddenly moved from Lagoon.....and appeared in the nature district's eastern area.'*

—What does this mean?

With an extraordinary phenomenon before her, Ymy was speechless. Even if Leon had returned to Orbie Clar from Lagoon, the method for that can't have been anything that would easily exist.

And the opponent Leon was fighting against.

"There are two Leons?"

The blond swordsman resembled him in every way from his face to his physique and even to the greatsword he wielded. However.....who was that blond swordsman?

The strength to take Leon's greatsword head-on. He even repelled it and used the return to unleash a violent stroke upwards. As soon as Leon avoided that with inhuman reaction speed, the opponent aimed for his exposed flank with his fist, not giving him even the slightest time to fix his posture.

.....That was an irregular fighter.

.....Any swordsman other than Leon would likely be unable to even react to the first counter.

Is this man also a Lord of Unusual Books?

But why does he resemble Leon to this degree? I can't think of him as some stranger.

"Syun-rei."

*'.....I don't know.'*

The telepathy came in a shaky and small voice.

I don't know. In other words, this man's identity was also unknown to Syun-

rei.

*'.....I've pinpointed.....the location. It's the fifth ward of the eastern area of the nature district.'*

—She wouldn't normally be this panicked.

—Because it's Leon. There's no way he would be surpassed with the greatsword.

She wished for and trusted in that.

But from the battle they had seen just now.....it had been only a moment, but wasn't Leon the one being pressured?

*'.....Leon.'*

Syun-rei's words like a prayer echoed through the tower and dispersed into thin air.

## Part 5

—Clack.

Her boot lightly collided against a tree root sticking out of the ground.

"Ohh.....toh, toh. That was close."

She placed a hand against the tree trunk and steadied herself from her pitched forward posture.

"Oh, you managed to keep yourself standing?"

The guard slightly ahead was facing her with a wry smile.

Looking at the hand that was offered to her—

"Hey, Tsali-san."



"What is it?"

"Was this hand to help me if I was about to fall?"

Eyriey asked Tsali, who still had her hand out, with trepidation.

"It's great that you managed that yourself."

In place of a response, the person in question shrugged.

"It's because Eyri-nee doesn't watch where's she's stepping."

"Ahh, what's with that look? You're wrong! There was just a pretty butterfly on top of a leaf just now and I was interested!"

"You said the same thing when you got caught on a vine just before this."

"Mghh. That was just because there was an unusual bird call....."

"No, no, it's not like I'm poking fun at you."

Tsali pulled back her hand and once again turned around and started walking. That tone of voice sounded more like she was enjoying Eyriey's reactions.

"Children have many more things besides their feet to look at. It's endearing if you consider falling to be an expression of curiosity."

".....I feel like that statement is highlighting the children part too much."

"It's true you're a child though?"

Tsali laughed and, for some reason, her gaze was directed at Eyriey's chest—

"Your underwear size hasn't changed since a year ago."

"Wh-why do you know that!?"

"This older sister knows many things."

She started walking again with a teasing smile.

"Mghh..... Ah, but Tsali-san, why do you call me Eyri-nee?"

"I told you Yuto told me that, right?"

"Not that. I'm younger so calling me Eyriey is fine. The only one who calls me Eyri-nee is Yuto so it's kind of embarrassing."

"Fumu....."

After a few seconds of thinking.

"Eyriey, Eyri-nee, Eyriey, Eyri-nee..... Eyri-nee it is. I'm used to it."

"Is that so?"

She got used to it after only using it several times?

"That's how it is."

".....Well, okay, if that's what you say."

She did her best to keep up with the woman walking briskly ahead of her. She might already be being considerate but because of the difference in their strides, a moment of carelessness would result in a large separation.

And.

That woman passed a root sticking out of the ground and came to a complete stop.

"We're here."

"Eh? What is it? What..... Huh, this is"

Tsali was looking at one side of a research facility sticking out. There were no windows or equipment, only a door at what would be the first floor.

"Ah, I remember seeing this before! It's like when I came with Yuto and Leon

before. Are we going to be doing the same kind of investigation?"

"Something like that. However.....this tremor."

Above the facility — the woman glared at the blue sky sparsely lined with clouds.

"Some people were  
**moved.**"

"Moved? You mean Sheltis and the others have already gone to another location?"

"I don't know how many people it was but they're no longer on this Lagoon."

"Ehhh!? And we came all this way just to find them!"

"Want to head back?"

Tsali pointed at the door that stood open.

Now what would you like to do? — The woman's eyes shone challengingly as if saying those words.

".....Hmm, but there might be others left behind."

"That's true."

"Then let's go! I can't relax until I've seen everybody's faces!"

"Well done."

She patted her head.

".....Jeez, you're treating me like a child again!"

"Eyri-nee, you're just too cute."

The guard smiled with a teasing look in her eyes. That seemed to indicate it was neither serious nor a joke; it was a mix of both.

"We're going in. Follow me."

"Ah, o-okay!"

Is it okay to not be on guard? Tsali boldly went through the door and didn't have a whiff of caution or alertness about her. Even when descending the stairs underground, she casually did it without a care.

"Hey, hey, Tsali-san, have you come here before?"

"No, to be honest, I have no idea what the layout is like beyond this. Well, there are some kindly laid out guideposts so we'll just follow those."

Diagonally ahead — on the simple wall with a thin metal plate tacked on, there was a small but clear scratch. Multiple at regular intervals. And it was easy to spot since it was at eye level.

"Ohh? Now that you mention it!"

Once she knew about it, Eyriey could make a conjecture as well. It was a sign

left behind by the main squad for the detached squad.

"I wonder if Sheltis is up ahead."

"I don't know about that. Personally, I'm hoping to see somebody else."

"Hoeh? Somebody else meaning who?"

"The guys who built this anthill. I'm looking forward to hearing their story firsthand."

Tsali narrowed her eyes in what could be construed as being belligerent. Taking her hand from behind, Eyriey pulled at her.

"Ah, wa-wait! .....I think something's coming!"

Footsteps could be heard from the passage leading to the left. The curious point was that despite being boots, it sounded like metal. And from the echoes.....it wasn't just one or two people.

"The guards, huh. Maybe we're being treated as illegal trespassers?"



What to do. Fool them with an excuse when we're spotted? Or is it time for the debut of my back-up anti-molester pepper spray?

Before she could come to a conclusion, a shadow appeared from the passage.

A shadow resembling a human. It was covered in iron armor from the top of its head to the tips of its toes, with a massive mechanical left arm and a machine gun for a right. The mark glowing blue atop its armor was probably a shinryoku seal.

—A heavy mechanical soldier equipped with even anti-Yuugenshu weaponry. And a great number of them enough to clot up the passageway.

"W-wait a second!?"

Rather than guards, aren't these battle machines for eliminating vicious animals or Yuugenshu? And with these numbers, if a flesh-and-blood human were to take those attacks.....

.....Crap.

.....And these guys are completely standalone. They don't care if the opponents happen to be human?

"Tsali-san!"

Eyriey took her hand and made to run away.

Before that, she saw the robotic soldiers in the frontmost row line their sights up. The boorish design fired several dozens of bullets—

Dozens of bullets.....Huh?

"It doesn't hurt."

"Of course it won't hurt if you don't get shot."

Eyriey gingerly opened her eyes to see Tsali standing in front just as usual.

".....Huh?"

"I told you I'm an outstanding guard, right?"

Clatter. She smiled calmly while standing on the bullets that were supposed to have been fired at them just now.

She cut them out of the air? No, that not it. The bullets themselves changed their flight path downwards. I don't get the reason behind it but that's what it feels like.

"So shall we get going, Eyri-nee? The search looks like it's about to get interesting."

"Huh? But just in front of us—"

"Is something there?"

Being asked a question in response, Eyriey blinked repeatedly. The dozens of heavy robotic soldiers had already fallen and stopped moving.

"Eh? H-how did you"

"Who knows? Maybe my charm is effective on machines too so they surrendered."

Maybe there was some kind of trick or she used techniques like Sheltis such that Eyriey couldn't process it. No matter how much she thought about it, Eyriey couldn't understand it.

"O-ohhhhhhhh!? I don't really get it but you're amazing, Tsali-san!"

"Have you calmed down, milady?"

Brushing her glossy bangs to the side, Tsali started walking again.

"We'll be moving faster for a bit. It looks like there's a lot of ground to cover."

## Part 6

"That's.....the art called Celestial Imaging that can foresee the future."

The man bearing the nickname of  
'Dark Grey'

didn't move. A large rifle held in his right hand and a small automatic pistol in his left. Each was painted in an off white and camouflaged to look like animal bones.

"The inescapable magic bullet. So named because it's fired after reading the enemy's future movements and how they will dodge....."

"You've done your research."

Exposing her face hidden behind her blinder, Horn glared at Beltoma.

"Research? No, I searched."

The man wearing camo gear up to his head shook his head from side to side.

"For a delightful, delightful kindred spirit."

"Unfortunately, I have not a speck of intention of becoming your kindred spirit. I have other matters to attend to."

Confirming the feel of the SMG in her hand, she took stock of her opponent. Approximately seven meters. It was close enough that missing was an impossibility even without looking. For both her and her opponent.

"....."

Both continued standing at attention and glaring at each other. Neither lifted their guns nor loosened their postures that resembled the trees around them.

A balance of silence.

What broke that harmony a sudden whirlwind. It kicked up loose dirt and dry leaves high into the air.

Immediately after, lead-colored bullets were launched from the barrels of each of their guns.

—A single gunshot.

"I"

Jumping directly to the side and turning away her upper body, she dodged the bullet that scraped right by her chest. Following the momentum from that, she spun to the left and ran counterclockwise.

.....There was only the sound of a single gunshot.

.....So he fired at the exact same time as me.

The Lord of Unusual Books was running counterclockwise. Kicking off the ground with force that betrayed his dead tree appearance, he ran unnaturally like a butterfly in flight.

"How pointless."

In the face of Celestial Imaging, Beltoma could not escape her regardless of what kind of course he took. She lined up her shot with the future image of the Lord of Unusual Books heading diagonally backwards and pulled the trigger.

This is the end.

As soon as she was assured of that, a new gunshot sounded and Horn's bullet was deflected in midair.

"Wha!?"

It was different from the mateki barriers of Yuugenshu. Just now.....he shot down the bullet that was unavoidable?

"The unavoidable magic bullet is not all-powerful, is it?"

A string of white smoke was coming from the barrel of Beltoma's gun.

"It cannot change courses after it has been fired. As such.....I merely need to wait for it to be shot and then shoot it down."

"You sure make it sound simple."

For the unavoidable magic bullet, any action to dodge made before the firing would be pointless.



Then all you have to do is defend against it after it's shot.

—However, that's just the logic.

In actuality, humans aren't able to see the path a bullet travels.

To defend against Horn's bullets would require the ability to see the bullet's trail, inhuman reflexes and the precise techniques to respond.

.....I can't believe there's somebody who would do this who isn't a professional.

That absolute skill required an instinctual level of danger sensory. Amongst the Sennenshi, Ran and Leon stood out especially in this field.

"Your bullets are too straightforward."

The Lord of Unusual Books bent forward even further as if crawling along the ground and sped up his dash. She sent two shots to his evasion route and one more pursuing round with an eye feint mixed in.

But that was also repelled just short of Beltoma.

.....So it's not just a coincidence.

.....He's sniping my bullets down with nearly 100% accuracy.

"The trail will be roughly straight from the mouth of your barrel..... No matter how much of a magic bullet it is.....if you see the instant of its firing, figuring out the path is easy, right?"

Kachak.

The Lord of Unusual Books thrust out the rifle in his right hand. Distance of seven meters. It could be comparable to zero for a gunslinger but Horn had plenty of leeway.

—I'll perceive the instant he pulls the trigger with Celestial Imaging.

It would be fine if she just dodged the bullet's path in that instant.

"You want to dodge?"

".....What?"

"If you want to dodge, I'll count for you. On three."

Revealing his own firing timing. Is this a trick?

No, there's no abnormality within Celestial Imaging's future. He can't really be following that count?

"Three.....two.....one..... Now dodge this."

"!"

She certainly saw the moment of his firing with Celestial Imaging. And at the same time she stopped running counterclockwise, she jumped directly back, 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

—Crack.

The sound of something hard breaking.

In the next instant, an intense pain ran through Horn's left shoulder.

"——!"

A scream that couldn't quite be vocalized leaked from her throat. Her coat was torn at the left shoulder and the camouflage suit underneath was quickly dyed red with blood.

.....I should have.....avoided it.....but my left collarbone was shot?

.....What happened just now?

"Next."

".....Don't mess around!"

Clenching her teeth, she took another step forward. Eye to eye and barrel to barrel, she put force into her SMG's trigger. Distance, five meters. At this distance, even if he tries to shoot my bullets down, he can't react to them all!

A single set of gunshots.

Amongst the gunshots, one had grazed his thigh and another was pierced deep into a flank.

"It scratched me. I guess this is a little too close for me too."

Beltoma clicked his tongue at the welt that had formed on his thigh.

"Well, that was more than close enough."

".....Guh....."

Pressing down on the wound in her left flank, Horn had dropped to one knee but still held onto her gun.

.....I see.

.....I can't see it with my Celestial Imaging.

Not even bothering to hide her ragged breathing, she turned up the corners of her mouth into a deep smile.

"So it's an invisible bullet that couldn't become an unavoidable magic bullet."

"That's how it is."

Animal bones — the Lord of Unusual Books held his rifle whose design pattern evoked a large animal's spine.

.....Is it that gun's make or Beltoma's ability?

.....Either way, the bullet is accelerating unnaturally.

A superspeed bullet which had surpassed the domain of sight.

Ordinarily, a speed of 400 meters per second would warrant "high speed" for a round. However, Beltoma's gun was likely shooting at double that speed. It was probably reaching triple at its fastest.

Beltoma pulled the trigger — it would be fine to say she was hit as soon as she recognized that. That was why she couldn't read the bullet path even with Celestial Imaging.

Celestial Imaging did capture it.

It was, but she couldn't see it herself.

"I don't have to explain the secret?"

"I told you, didn't I? I don't have time to waste on you."

.....I've figured out his trick.

.....But I paid too large a price.

Moreover, despite figuring out the opponent's ability, she couldn't think of a way of countering it right now.

.....If it was any other time, I could've thought about running away.

Clenching her teeth against the severe pain running through her abdomen, she maintained her calm.

Pushing her gun barrel against the ground, it served as a cane replacement.

.....I won't give up.

.....I had already planned to join this mission even without Meimel's request.

*'It will be rewarded, for sure.'*

*'I've heard your report. It said you defeated that Yuugenshu. ....So believe in what happens after this. In what you have done. And in me.'*

Priestess Ymy. I owe that woman a debt for purifying the orphanage child's mateki. Truly, it's almost too large of a debt.

.....Cultivation of Yuugenshu. The goal of the Lords of Unusual Books will expose the Priestesses to danger.

.....My sister is a given but there's no way I could just not repay my debt to that cheeky priestess, right?

"Honestly, I've become indebted to someone troublesome."

She whispered that quietly and then turned her gaze to the Lord of Unusual Books once again.



"Well, that's fine, I've come to a conclusion."

"About how to surrender?"

Beltoma scoffed and Horn shook her head with a fearless smile. She slightly lifted the barrel of her gun off the ground and then.

"About how to turn this around."

She aimed at her opponent — no, she aimed at his feet and strafed. The dozens of bullets dug into the ground and blew up a dense cloud of dirt.

"A smokescreen....."

"I don't want to but I'll keep you company for a long fight."

The smoke was dispersed by the wind and after it had cleared up — Horn was no longer there. Only scattered crimson bloodstains continued into the sea of trees.

## Part 7

"Huick-sama!"

A whirlpool of fire closed in from directly behind him in his blind spot at the same time as Kuro's warning. Sparks continued to rain down from blaze.

.....There's no end to this.

Just before he hid behind the wall of fire, he threw the two knives in his right hand at the same time.

"Wahhh!"

Natraja let out a cheer while dodging. Passing a few centimeters over her chin, one knife went to the floor and the other stuck into a pillar further in.

"Amazing. I'm in suspense wondering when one will hit."

"Dear me..... Sis, your eyes are just too good."

He took a deep breath as he wiped the sweat coming out from the heat. Taking one look around the Chapel which was now 60% engulfed in flame, Huick glared at the woman atop the altar.

"Could you just let yourself get hit already?"

"Gosh, I'll think about it if you let yourself get toasted by my flames."

The Lord of Unusual Books put a finger to her captivating, flushed cheeks and smiled. At her feet, along the walls and even on the ceiling, Huick's hidden weapons were stabbed into every area but there was not a single scratch on the woman.

".....Unfathomable."

"My beauty?"

"I actually welcome that part but something just doesn't click."

.....How is she seeing my hidden weapons?

Even though I'm hiding my actions behind the flames, she's dodging like she already saw what's coming. Just intuition can't explain this. There has to be a reason she can easily see the chakrams which are thin as can be and the transparent needles made out of fortified glass.

"So I thought about a lot of things."

This time, he jumped sideways to dodge the incoming flames. Riding on that momentum, he moved towards an interior pillar and kicked off that pillar to rise up higher — he climbed up over the chandelier.

The flames wreathed around Natraja. Huick observed the pillar of flame that even now was burning high enough to char the ceiling and let out a breath.

"Well, I knew it had to be this."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Your flames come in two types."

He became convinced after seeing everything from the ceiling to the floor. Natraja's flames were split into those that burned their surroundings and those that did not.

"True flames that give off heat and light. The other type is just red light with no heat. It's a shinryoku barrier that's fashioned to look like flames."

"....."

"I think barrier arts are blue by default? That would give it away too easily so you're using baptism arts which give out red light with them and have that wrapped around yourself. You sense my hidden weapons the instant they enter that territory. And that's how you're seeing them."

".....Mm, correct."

Natraja scratched her cheek shyly.

"How surprising, I wonder how long it's been since I was seen through on the first encounter?"

"Do I get a reward?"

"I'll present you with scalding flames. These are real ones so rest assured."

"I'd like to take a pass on that."

He jumped off the chandelier and distanced himself from the rising flames.

"Something's off."

"Hm?"

"I could say the same for you. The man known as the 'Ninth' can only throw out two knives in a situation like this? Judging from your nickname, you should be able to handle nine hidden weapons at once."

"That just means my nickname is bluster. If I threw nine hidden weapons at once, I'd be one hell of a street performer."

".....Well, fine. I'll just force it out of you."

From behind Natraja, a particularly massive crimson flame burst into life. It

rained down flares to the entirety of the Chapel."

"Oi, oi, you're gonna end up burning the whole Chapel down."

"If you'd burn up first, the floor would be spared. Would you do me that favor?"

"No can do."

.....It's pretty much a rain of cannonballs.

He hid himself in the shadow of the pillar directly behind himself and let the flares go past. ....But the Chapel would become a sea of flames at this rate. He'd lose his ability to close the distance to the range of his hidden weapons.

"This heat is an unexpectedly troublesome foe."

He clicked his tongue as he used his wrist to wipe away the waterfall of sweat flowing down his neck. Even if he didn't take a direct hit, dehydration was a very real possibility.

.....It can't be helped.

.....I had hoped to settle this as gently as possible.

"Oiii, Kuro. How are you holding up?"

"Nothing major. The only issue is that the sweat is making my suit cling to me and it feels nasty."

His subordinate's voice came from the pillar directly beside his.

"Then why don't you take it—"

"I won't take it off."

".....No charm at all."

He smiled wryly while leaned against the pillar.

"Can you do it?"



"You'll just order me if I say no."

.....Good answer.

He took out a new knife from the holder on his belt. He hid four knives in each hand for a total of eight. That was the signal.

"I'll go first."

Kuro lifted her iron fans and ran out from behind the pillar with terrific speed.

Overhead — diagonally overhead, a rain of fire was falling like a blizzard. All of that was blown away with a single sweep of her iron fans.

"Well done!"

"Not yet."

With the admiring Natraja in the corner of her eye, she once more mowed down the flames in her surroundings. The rifts in the air created by the iron fans sliced away at the flames—

"Huick-sama!"

At the same time as his subordinate's voice, Huick leapt out from behind the pillar. He ran straight down the path Kuro had opened through the flames.

"S'up, sis, get ready. This'll sting a bit."

With eight hidden weapons in hand, he sped towards the Lord of Unusual Books atop the altar without deviation.

"How about I just melt those knives with my flames?"

Roar — the flames towering before Natraja howled ferociously. She had gotten rid of the shinryoku barrier-made fake flames and called upon real ones once again.

"Can you pierce my flames?"

"Nope. I don't need to."

He brandished both arms in front of the blockading flames. And Huick the 'Ninth' threw eight knives at once.

—Clang!

"Eh?"

Natraja leaked out her first agitated breath. All the hidden weapons she thought would be aimed at her went to a different place — some went to the ceiling, others to the floor and some went past and stabbed into the wall.

"I'm done throwing eight."

"Throwing knives into all the wrong places? Just what.....!?"

The Lord of Unusual Books looked around at her surroundings. She suddenly jumped back without warning.

—Thuk.

The ninth knife dropped from directly above. It grazed the retreating Natraja's shoulder and fell to her feet.

"Oi, oi, you even dodged that one....."

He sighed as he looked on at the ninth that missed its mark.

.....I thought she dispelled her shinryoku barriers.

.....She just barely sensed it with the scant vestiges.

"Hehhh."

The Lord of Unusual Books picked up the knife on the ground. She stared at the gleaming white body of the blade enough to bore a hole into it and brought her lips up into an alluring smile.

"That was close. This knife is the ninth..... So this is your trump card."

"Who knows. I don't think it's as great as that."

"Hmmm. But when did you throw it? It's perfectly unharmed.....though it would be normal for the tip to have melted from my flames. I also didn't see you make to throw something after the first eight."

She ran her finger along the blade and exaggeratedly tilted her head.

"I still have questions..... This knife isn't a real one. It's made to look like iron but it's actually iron molecules that have been given form with advent-type shinryoku arts. And the eight you threw beforehand. These are real but they're covered in a thin layer of shinryoku. Does that serve some purpose?"

"Sis, are you a researcher by heart?"

"I suppose. If it's analyzing something intriguing like this.....for example."

Throwing aside the knife, she calmly stood upon the altar with her arms crossed.

"With the eight knives serving as the boundaries of an area, you can create the ninth knife there — How about that for a hypothesis?"





"....."

"Oh, was that wrong?"

".....No, no, that's completely correct. I can't even be frustrated with that."

He spread his sweat-drenched palms open and sighed.

.....It's amazing of you to see through it in one go.

That was the sole shinryoku art that Huick the  
'*Ninth*'

knew. Unlike the Lord of Unusual Books, he couldn't just create freely create flames and required a boundary marked for its activation. On the other hand, if he had the marking done, he could perform a snipe at any time.

Against an opponent that expected him to physically throw his knife, that  
'*ninth that wasn't thrown*'  
was truly an unavoidable strike.....or so it should have been.

"That's an interesting mechanism. But it loses its formidability after you figure



out the trick. Is this fight over?"

The Lord of Unusual Books with her crimson hair swaying snapped her fingers.

At the same time, all of the flames around her burst with great intensity and rained down balls of flame. The ceiling was charred, the walls were burned and the floor was scorched.

The flame enveloping the Chapel raised its head like a snake.....

"I win—"

"Nope."

Huick pressed down on his hat and declared so to the Lord of Unusual Books atop the altar.

"I win this battle of deception."

"——!"

The flames that had been on the verge of striking any time came to a halt.

"I told you it'd sting a bit."

".....Wha.....this.....is"

Natraja looked down at the knife stabbed into her stomach.

".....When did you.....throw this....."

"I didn't throw it. That knife is also made of shinryoku crystals. Just like you said, I used the eight knives to mark out a territory and then made a knife there."

".....But you're.....the Ninth....."

"I'm the Tenth."

He faced down Natraja's glare.

"I only call myself the Ninth to make the enemy let down their guard."

"~~~~!?"

The man called the Ninth would undoubtedly use nine weapons. That's what she would think unconsciously but unfortunately for her, Huick was not naive enough to let his tricks slip out ahead of time.

.....Well, the truth is that I'm not actually the Tenth either.

"Guh."

Her one-piece's midsection was stained bright red. She removed the knife from her stomach with an annoyed look but ended up crouching in anguish.

"You should stop that. Your organs aren't really damaged but your abdominal muscles should be shredded. If you don't settle down, that pricey-looking dress is going to get even redder....."

Huick stopped what he was saying and stared at her. He could see her stomach while she was crouched over. Her bare skin was in view behind the ripped cloth. That bare skin was covered in scales giving off a dark green lustre.

—This is.

".....So you.....saw it."

A voice that could be mistaken for a lump of pure hatred rumbled through the Chapel.

"Huick-sama, this woman is.....one of the  
'*Koh nomads*'."

They were a race of demi-humans that covertly lived in areas with blizzards, torrential downpours, deserts, *etc.* that rarely appeared on Orbie Clar save for the absolutely bare minimum.

They had excellent kinetic vision and physical prowess as a strong point and her special characteristic was the dark green scales that could be seen covering her skin. The skin had come from evolution to survive the harsh climates but the majority of the

'*Koh nomads*'

hated exposing their skin, with many of them living their lives hiding it.

".....Yeah, but what does this mean?"

From what Huick knew, those with scales amongst the  
'*Koh nomads*'

had scales from their necks down, up to their elbows, down to their thighs and all around their stomachs to their backs. But Natraja only had scales on a section of her stomach. Her exposed shoulders and thighs that could be seen were white skin.

".....I have.....undergone dozens of surgeries to remove my scales, you seeee."

Natraja should have been bleeding from her stomach but she shakily stood up.

"It hurt so, so badly..... Just how many sleepless nights have I endured..... But this is all for becoming a woman suitable for Armadel-sama. I regret nothing."

.....We've.....quite literally gotten under someone's skin.

The indignation and bloodthirst spread out to fill the Chapel. Huick clenched his jaw at the sight of the Lord of Unusual Books glaring in his direction like a different person.

Removal of scales via surgery. But there were still scales leftover even after dozens of procedures and she was hiding that with her clothes.

"But this is ironic."

She pointed directly below her chest. The knife wound that should have been stabbed in deeply was strangely shallow and the bleeding had already stopped. The resilient scales had caught the knife and stopped it at just the skin.

"You and I.....we are all unfortunate."

The Lord of Unusual Books descended step after step from the altar.

"You two.....have.....seen something that you should not have. That which I did not want to show anyone except Armadel-sama."

Her high heels lit ablaze with a small pop. Those flames caught onto the edge of her one-piece and her body was wrapped in crimson flames. The flames grew stronger as her crimson hair and white skin were burned.

.....Burning herself with her own flames?

.....Is it beyond her control?

"—You unforgivable two."

The instant the metallic decorations atop the altar were licked by a section of the flames, they melted into a pool. Similarly, the ceiling and even the massive stone pillars touched by the flames were melting and shedding stone-colored droplets.

The blaze behind her blew up into the form of a massive tsunami. Just looking up at it hurt as the heat baked his eyes. Its intensity was like looking directly at the sun.

".....Such heat!?"

This is abnormal. Taking this unprotected is an act of suicide.

—How about Kuro's iron fans? No, those will be melted by the flames.

—Hiding behind the pillars? No, that flame will just melt them in an instant.

Defense and evasion were both impossible. He had no methods available to intercept those flames.

"—I will have you taste the same pain!"

It was simultaneous. At the same time Huick and his subordinate made for the exit, Natraja's tsunami of flame pushed forward.

"Kuro, don't look back! Your eyes will fry!"

The approaching wall of flame. The tsunami that was high enough to reach the ceiling was approaching with frightening might. It melted the chandelier, the pillars and burned the floor marble black in an instant.

"Tch!"

Leaving the Chapel, they headed for the three-way fork that they had separated with Leon and Sheltis at.

"Not yet!"

Kuro's scream. Even as the flames burned away the surrounding walls without a trace, they closed in without losing any momentum.

.....Can we escape?



"Run to the entrance! Don't get engulfed in the flames no matter what you do!"

Back turned to the incoming flames, Huick shouted at his subordinate.

An instant.

The passage they were in was dyed crimson with scarlet, roaring flames—

# Part 8

An omen of wind.

The super high-speed swordplay that severed the air and even created vacuums was already beyond both of their abilities to see.

.....Focus. Don't miss the sound of the wind.

In response to the shadow before him retreating back, he did the opposite and stepped in strongly to pursue. He put the strength from his back foot into his back, from his back into his shoulders, and swung his greatsword—

A slash.

"!"

Without swinging down his greatsword, Leon kicked off the ground and jumped directly to the side. Afterwards, the sword that was thrust out without any warning easily shredded the edge of his coat.

"Hah!"

He cut down diagonally at the same moment the thrust ended. Tch — his sword cut nothing but a few golden strands from Armadel's head. Immediately, Armadel's sword leapt up from directly below to intersect with his.

.....No chance for a follow-up, huh.

Twisting his upper body, he dodged by a hair the sword that scraped by his chin. Following that, he repelled the incoming fist with his own fist. Neither of them was looking at their swords or fists.

They were focused on the shoulders and hips — they only looked at the important parts for starting an attack and relied on their instincts and experience to instantly react.

Clangggggg!

A high-pitched sound was given off as they locked swords.

"So we're evenly matched in strength."

With their noses almost in range of each other, Armadel made a little smile.

"Then this match shall be decided by none other than pure sword skill. Both of our spirits shall do the talking."

".....I wonder about, that!"

He stepped in deeper with that breath. Changing his forward motion into a spinning one, he blew away Armadel together with his sword.

—Tap.

The blond greatsword user landed a few meters away without difficulty.

"You don't like contests of strength?"

"It's a waste of energy."

He quickly responded and stealthily fixed his grip on his sword. ....His hand was trembling slightly. The collision leading to their locked swords had numbed both his hands and he couldn't even grip his sword correctly.

.....Our strength is even? What a load of crap.

.....There's a gap. I'm slightly below.

Physical strength. Reaction speed. Decision-making. Above all else, our training level as greatsword users is different. I'm falling behind him by one step in everything: plain sword speed, technique in chaining together follow-ups, tactics, precision in changing from defense to attack, and so on.

A gap in strength. Each difference is slight but the difference our combat strengths when all of them are added up.....is not something so small.

.....This is a Lord of Unusual Books.

.....This is.

"Is something wrong?"

**"I'm glad it was you."**

Armadel had a doubtful look in his eyes as Leon didn't even attempt to hide his smile.

".....I really am."

Because he was able to confirm his brother survived despite being enemies?

No.

"Let's continue."

He gripped his sword with his still-trembling hands. And then dashed. No tricks or anything, he simply added his own speed to his greatsword, a dash at the limits.

Facing him, the blond swordsman wordlessly held his sword above his head.

—Two strokes are unnecessary.

He controlled tactics with his eyes, distance with his feet, his sword with his arms and battle with his sword.

""\_\_\_\_\_!"

A wordless roar.

Not just one of them, both let out cries of fervor at the same time which echoed through the waterfall ravine.

Two flashes.

The intersection of gold and silver lasted but a moment. After that, they both took distance with their backs to the waterfall.

"I guess you could say we've both taken one hit."

Armadel said that as he turned and there was a small rip in his coat at the shoulder. However, it was just the fabric that was damaged and there was not a trace of a cut on his skin.

".....Bullshit."

Leon also turned around with ragged breaths.

Sting — he let out a pained breath without thinking at the severe pain that

ran through his right elbow.

"It's just a scratch for you, right?"

"You sure make it sound simple."

The elbow of his white coat was dyed red and the droplets continued on to the ground. The artery in his elbow was probably damaged. Left untreated, he would eventually be unable to hold his sword.

But—

"I made it simple because you have that look on your face."

".....Of course."

Now that it had come to this, Leon couldn't suppress the joy in his heart.

—I'm glad.

Because I confirmed my brother, the embodiment of my ideals, is alive? No.



I'm happy that he is still able to be my ideal even after all these years we've been apart.

.....I thought memories were beautified the more time passed.

.....I feared that the ideal I sought would one day be a mere skeleton of itself.

But that's wrong.

Just as I had imagined.....no, there is a greatsword user even better than I had imagined right here.

Armadel Nestorius Ova.

Lord of Unusual Books Number One,  
'Silver'

Armadel.

"Because you have remained who you are.....I can become even stronger."

He gripped his sword with his powerless right arm and clamped down on his right hand with his left. In that instant, Leon did not miss the tiny fragment that broke off his sword tip.

Crumble.

A single crack ran down from the tip of his sword and split countless times as if forming a spiderweb until it covered the sword's body.

—So you can even break a greatsword covered in ice crystals.

He had gone past the point of awe and gone speechless. This greatsword had experienced countless battles and fought dozens of Yuugenshu without dulling in the slightest.

.....He's too far.

.....How do I catch up to my ideal?

Standing in his blurred vision, a greatsword user that looked basically the same as him.

"\_\_"

Suddenly, he remembered the face of the Priestess who he served as a partner. Her sleek black hair and dainty build with a youthful face. Her face which was much more fearful than others.

".....Syun-rei."

Leon spoke that name knowing that it would not reach its recipient.

.....Was this how I appeared to you as well?

A Sennenshi is not allowed to lose.

But even beyond that, they were not allowed to leave their Priestesses in solitude. He might break one or both of those taboos now.

"Forgive me.....for this singular instance of selfishness in my life."

He let out a breath and stopped breathing. His spirit overcame his flesh and wiped away the fatigue; his resolve overcame his senses and nulled the pain from his elbow.

—Lift my sword to my shoulders and overhead.

"Fourth Sennenshi, Leon Nestorius Ova, engaging."

"I'll take you on."

Bathed in the spray from the waterfall.

The two swordsmen's voices echoed once more through the sheer cliffs of the ravine.

""——!"

Both of them with their greatswords that stood outside the norm at lengths comparable to an adult.

The silver-haired swordsman swung down from overhead and the blond swordsman swept up diagonally. Despite being faster than the eye can see, their strikes carried precision enough to thread a needle.

Slash.

The two swords which had become embodiments of slashes clashed head-on and passed each other by, leaving a slight reverberation.

"....."

"....."

Both the blond swordsman and silver-haired swordsman made not a quiver.

".....Splendid."

Finally, a word carrying some measure of inflection left Armadel's lips.

"Your spirit and strength are both at the pinnacle with your sword skills. Truly fitting for one known as the protector of a Priestess."

Crimson droplets flowed along the sword's hilt. The laceration on Armadel's right shoulder was proof beyond anything else that Leon's sword had grazed his ideal.

".....Bullshit."

The other voice came from directly behind  
Armadel.

Crack.....crack.....

The Sennenshi's voice overlapped with the sound of something cracking. At the same moment he stepped powerfully from his bent-over position to draw his sword that was stabbed into the ground—

Kii, iiiiiiiiii.....ii, ii.....iiiiiiinnn, nnn.....

Just like ice shattering, his greatsword shattered into countless fragments with a perfectly clear sound.

"....."

The Sennenshi watched the thousands of fragments dance through the air. His clothes were brutally torn from the left shoulder down to the right side of his torso and a great amount of blood flowed down his waist and dyed the

ground.

At last, his eyelids slowly closed.

".....I'm.....sor, ry."

Who were those words meant for?

The silver-haired swordsman whispered those words feebly and collapsed. He slipped on the slope of the cliff below him and tipped forward.

"\_\_"

Leon fell towards the waterfall basin. He still continued to hold onto the greatsword which had lost its body.

"....."

Finally came the quiet sound of something hitting the water.

Armadel did not turn around. He just sheathed his own sword and walked

towards the edge of the ravine.

"I don't think you're a man that will die with just this much?"

Nobody was there in the ravine to hear him. That slight monologue mixed with the waterfall's splashing and disappeared.



# Chapter 5 - Now We Meet

## Part 1

Sophia, floor 287.

".....No....."

Ymy didn't know how to describe what she had seen.

The images she had seen in the nature district via clairvoyance.  
Even though there was no possibility of error, she couldn't accept  
what had happened immediately.

.....Leon.....

.....lost.....and fell.....

Suddenly, the images being sent became unclear.

*'Ahhhh, ah.....ahhhh.....no,*



*happened?'*

"U-umm....."

Where do I start? Leon was supposed to be at Lagoon but suddenly appeared on Orbie Clar and fought with somebody that looked just like him.....

*'Just state the conclusion. What happened to who?'*

".....Leon was badly wounded and fell into a waterfall basin."

*'A waterfall basin? In Lagoon?'*

There were few islands in Lagoon capable of housing a waterfall. In these desperate times, Meimel immediately caught onto that abnormality.

"Y-yes! Leon should have been at Lagoon but Syun-rei said he suddenly appeared on Orbie Clar. So we watched his battle....."

*'Where on Orbie Clar?'*

"Syun-rei said it was the nature district's eastern area."

"Good work."

The telepathy ended and Meimel's voice came from her side. The room's door slid aside and a beautiful, tall Priestess quickly moved into the living room.

"Knowing this much is plenty. Syun-rei, can you hear me?"

Her coworker was staring absently at the ceiling. She extended a white hand to her cheeks—

"Syun-rei, listen to me. I'll be sending a rescue squad for Leon now."

"....."

"Leon's not dead for sure, right? There's no way he'd die."

"....."

"What you can do right now is send help as soon as possible."

Meimel cradled both Syun-rei cheeks and looked directly into her eyes.

"I'll order a party patrolling the nature district that's the closest to where Leon is. So tell me, where was Leon fighting?"

".....Eastern.....area.....eighth ward. There was a

ravine.....and waterfall."

Eastern area, eighth ward.

It's probably the large waterfall at Mio Ravine that empties into the large river which continues into the Biotope. It's deep and flows fast so he could just keep going if we don't get him.

"We'll save him before he drifts into the Biotope. —Ran, can you hear me? Give out the order for a search at the base of Mio Ravine. Send out four medical squads with clairvoyants, combat squads and communications squads. Hurry."

".....That's great. Thank you, Meimel."

They had done what they could for now. They could only believe in Leon and the rescue squads now.

"Now then, could I hear what happened?"

Meimel took hold of Syun-rei's hands and pulled her up, then carried her to the sofa.

"I've heard what happened up until your clairvoyance was blocked. What happened after? Why did Leon appear on Orbie Clar and who was he fighting with?"

"I.....don't know why he appeared on Orbie Clar. It really felt

like he just suddenly showed up."

"Was his opponent a Lord of Unusual Books?"

".....Probably."

"I'll change my question. Do we still have no information on the other members?"

Right, that was the thing.

Why did Leon appear on Orbie Clar? Maybe Sheltis and Horn have also returned from Lagoon.

".....I'll check."

Syun-rei whispered while reclined on the sofa.

"Okay. I would like to tell you not to push yourself but I have no choice this time. For now, check Orbie Clar via clairvoyance—"

Just before Meimel sighed.

*'Th.....at is, .....Ymy and I.....no relation.....you're saying.....'*

*'To be, .....Eden.....truth itself was dis,  
tor.....ted..... You.....three years a,  
.....what.....'*

—This is Sheltis' voice.

It's not telepathy. Is it coming from the tower's speaker system?

"Is Sheltis back!?"

"No, this isn't coming from within the tower. Considering the noise in the transmission.....it's a remote broadcast. From somewhere on the border of Orbie Clar."

Meimel had her arms folded as she glared at the speakers.

"I don't know why they're playing this but it's intentional. They're going to all this trouble for some reason."

"....."

.....It's hard.....to breathe.

Weighed down by a weight on her chest, Ymy leaned against the wall next to her and closed her eyes.

"....."

What is this feeling? The voice that's playing together with Sheltis'..... It's high even for a tenor voice..... I feel like I've heard this voice before.

But I can't remember.

Have I heard this voice somewhere in the past?



## Part 2

The faint smell of blood mixed with the smell of earth.

".....Now then."

She slightly opened her eyes. A brown tree and brown earth. Before her eyes, several strange vines were hanging down and swaying gently.

.....This wound is a bother.

Looking down at the bullet wound in her left flank, Horn gingerly took a breath.

This wound was inflicted by Beltoma's bullet. She had washed the wound out with disinfectant and wrapped bandages above a gauze to stop the bleeding. ....Even then, the bandage was slowly being dyed red.

After settling the score with Beltoma, I should head back to the airship first.

Or maybe I'll lose consciousness from excessive blood loss first.

".....I'm going to hate this from the bottom of my heart."

*'I don't want to but I'll keep you company for a long fight.'*

That was just a bluff. Going for a drawn-out battle with this wound would be digging her own grave.

.....But I had no choice but to say that back there.

She had to disinfect her wound as quickly as possible. It would be pointless if she died even if she managed to beat Beltoma in a

gunfight.

"—"

She tossed the disinfectant bottle and once again gripped her SMG.

She still had strength left. Her sole concern would be missing due to pain but she couldn't afford to worry about that.

.....'Dark Grey' Beltoma.

On top of his supersonic bullets, he also had shooting speed and precision. Quite honestly the personification of a gun.

"....."

With her SMG in one hand, she took a glance at the silver pistol in the holster on the left side of her waist.

Rusty Height — it fired special bullets that fragmented into twelve bullets upon discharge. Even Beltoma would be hard pressed to shoot all of them down if this was fired point blank.

".....No."

I doubt I can get that close against him with this wound. And Rusty Height is a pistol; it won't work for long-range sniping.

If I have to hit him—

"Long-range sniping. You need to snipe me from a distance where I won't notice.....right?"

—He found me first!?

"Kuh!"

Withstanding the intense pain, she twisted only the top half of her body. Still seated on the ground, she used just her upper arm muscles to hoist up her gun and aim behind her. She prepared to shoot and be shot at the same time.

".....He's gone?"

The slim man with a gun painted grey. He was nowhere in sight.

—Impossible, where did he go?

He wasn't naive enough of an opponent to give up such an absolute advantage of an assault from behind. That he didn't attack instead brought her unease. The tension that stopped her breathing slowly spread throughout the forest.....

The bushes to her side rustled with unnatural timing.

"There!"

"Nuuuuu. Wait, Horn-chan, hold, hold! We're allies, allies!"

".....Hah?"

"Like, I, said. Aww, it can't be helped."

The bushes rustled and what first came into sight was a metal spear taller than an adult. Right behind it, a blonde woman poked her face out.

".....Ishtar?"

"Yeah, yeah. Ahh, how scary. I thought I'd be shot by mistake."

She sighed in an exaggerated way.

.....This is hard to swallow so suddenly.

This woman should be on standby at the tower. Why would she be at Lagoon? And why is she here before me?

".....Are you the real Ishtar?"

"Ehhh? Why are you doubting me?"

"The real Ishtar shouldn't be here. If the one at the tower is the real one, then who the hell are you?"

"—Then would you like to test it?"

The air suddenly froze over.

"If you think I'm not Ishtar, shall we have a battle here? You'll understand whether you like it or not."

"....."

The spear user standing there gave off a bottomless sense of intimidation. She glared at her eyes which gave off the feel of a

fearless smile—

".....Fine."

With a small sigh, Horn lowered her gun.

"I knew you'd understand, Horn-chan! Ishtar is so happy—"

"I don't think there's anybody that can mimic that part of you."

As the woman writhed her body and raised a voice of praise, Horn truly sighed with all her spirit this time.

"Explain the circumstances briefly."

"Why Ishtar is here? Well, if I had to say, it was Meimel-sama's order."

"The Priestess'?"

Impossible. The one who told Ishtar to remain at the tower was Meimel herself to begin with.

"To fool you enemies, you must first fool your allies."

She casually tossed a change of bandages over.

"Ishtar got into the cargo hold of your airship sometime yesterday.

The reason none of you were told was as a countermeasure in the off-chance the third organization has a spy within the tower. No matter who the spy could be, it wouldn't be found out like this, right?"

They were led to believe she remained at the tower but she had instead tailed Horn of the detached unit.

As only she and Meimel were aware of this, there would be no way for a spy to know of it even if there was one.

"And what about that spy?"

"It looks like it was needless worry. —But just that is good enough."

Ishtar made a childish smile and stared at Horn's stomach.

"That's not like you. Are you having a hard time?"

".....You have bad tastes."

She finally understood. Before Beltoma could launch an assault from behind, he was assaulted by this spear user behind him.

"What about Beltoma?"

"He went somewhere. He said something like 'That's enough time' so I don't think he'll be back."

".....I'm being mocked."

She spat out a wad of blood and put her hand against a tree trunk.

She scolded herself for growing dizzy from the pain and blood loss and stood up while trembling all over.

.....Enough time?

.....So he only planned to block me from the start.

"Well, there's no need to beat yourself up so much!"

"What do you mean?"

"Beltoma was his name? When Ishtar got behind him, he didn't notice until she got really close. I think he had to stay focused with you as his opponent."

".....Whatever."

Ishtar held out her hand but Horn stopped her with her eyes and started walking.

"Where's your communicator?"

"It broke."

"So you were also attacked. Was it a Lord of Unusual Books?"

"No.....I wouldn't say it was them. It broke yesterday. It was my cute little sister though so I'll let it slide."

She sidestepped the question with a troubled expression that was rare for her.

"Horn-chan, do you know where the base is?"

"I've heard that much from the main unit. It's less than thirty

minutes away from here. ....Just to note, don't leave me behind

and go on ahead."

"Okay, okay."

Ishtar didn't even attempt to hide her wry smile as she looked up  
at the heavens.

"Then—"

*'Horn-san!'*

A Priestess' voice rang directly within the back of her head,  
wiping out Ishtar's.

"Ymy Ele Soufflenictole. There's been no communication for a while  
so I thought something happened."

*'That was..... I-I'll tell you about it later! More important  
right now, Sheltis..... Did you already link up with the main  
unit!?''*

"I was just about to head over. What happened?"

*'Please.....quickly link up with the main unit and contact  
Sheltis. Tell him.....to stop. If you don't stop him soon, there  
will be no turning back—'*

## Part 3

Now we'll return about one hour prior.

A summer breeze blew across the green land.

"\_\_"

Holding down his billowing coat, Sheltis looked at the

surroundings.

"This is?"

As far as he could see, it was an expansive prairie of deep green.

A vast forest could be seen in the distance, bordering the field of rolling hills.

"Do you remember this place?"

".....It resembles the place where '*Golden*' Maha was

protecting that water tank with a Yuugenshu in it."

"That's it."

Stab. Igun-I stabbed his twin needle-like swords into the ground

and clapped.

"It is exactly the place you fought at with Maha-san save for one

thing. Look over there. Only the area over there has the grass torn

up and the ground beneath exposed, right?"

"....."

The earth that Igun-I indicated looked as if it had been gouged out

with an explosion. He also remembered seeing those massive slabs of

bedrock jutting out of the ground in several places.

—What does this mean?

I should be at Lagoon, far from Orbie Clar but somehow I've ended

up in Orbie Clar's nature district before I realized it?

".....Igun-I."

"Yes, it is my handiwork. It is an ability that operates on yet another set of laws different from those of shinryoku arts..... To be more precise, it is a shinryoku art that advanced in a world without Yuugenshu."

A world without Yuugenshu?

"That kind of"

"Did you think Yuugenshu were prevalent throughout the entire world? That's not the case. Even within Eden, there are places in which Yuugenshu do not exist."

".....I don't believe you."

The world shrouded in deadly miasma.

Eden is a world overflowing with tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Yuugenshu. That was common sense for anybody on Orbie Clar.

"My, my, how unlike you."

Beneath the black hat, Sheltis could tell there was a smile on his shapely face.

"You should understand, having fallen into Eden."

".....So it really was you."

The culprit behind contacting every terminal in Sophia and spreading information that a Yuugenshu assuming human form was lurking in the tower.

"Ahh, the message to the tower. It made it safely, I'm glad."

"Screw off!"

The land returned to silence.

"Why..... Why use such underhanded tricks?"

"You won't fool me. There's something else you'd rather ask."

"!"

"Don't hold back, I'm sure you have something you want to know more than that. Let's see, for example.....'*Why do you know that I*



*fell into Eden!?'."*

Shing. He rubbed the tips of his drawn swords together.

"Right, Sheltis!"

".....!"

The Lord of Unusual Books rotated his body like a spinning top and dodged the upward slash then swung down the sword opposite Sheltis' from diagonally above. After repelling that sword, Igun-I's movements didn't stop. As if having foreseen his defense beforehand, he warded off the force and closed in instantaneously with a kick off the ground.

.....He's fast!?

.....No, what's more concerning is.....those movements. It's as if.

"Just as I'd expect, even if you're shaken up, your body responds properly."

The black shadow went from being right up against the ground to standing in a heartbeat. Or so Sheltis thought, but he was suddenly hidden in his blind spot, connecting that into a sideways sweep with the might of a whirlwind.

—Even if he's blocked or dodged, he chains it into his next action.

—I have to stop him even if I have to force it a bit.

"Oh?"

"I'm done repelling."

He clashed with Igun-I's swords head-on. Sheltis glared at Igun-I as the four swords between them scraped against each other, raising shrill noises.

"Well done, but I suppose my moves were easy to read."

".....Why do you think so?"

"Because these are your movements from three years ago. I'm just

copying them."

Eh?

"Oopsie-daisy. I just can't compete with you in arm strength. I'm as frail as I look."

.....What's going on?

.....It's true that Igun-I's movements were extremely easy to predict.

He could tell the timing attacks would come at and his body had responded naturally to the combos from just now.

"You look like you just chewed a bitter bug. But information of this degree is easily gathered through contact with Mikuva's Crimson Eye. It's nothing major."

That he had fallen into Eden. His swordplay from three years ago. I see, it really is easily available information. But why would he be so particular about me—

"Ah, before you misunderstand, I'll correct one thing. The information that can be obtained about you through the '*Crimson Eye*' is simply related to your dual swords. Your fall to Eden is unobtainable from the '*Crimson Eye*'."

".....Eh?"

"The fact that you fell into Eden isn't recorded."

Mikuva's Crimson Eye.

A treasure of the Governmental Sector and massive shinryoku system which recorded all happenings within the world as images through the use of territory shinryoku arts. Even though that's what I've heard?

"Now that's the issue. You fell into Eden but Mikuva's Crimson Eye has no records of it. Which one is the truth in this case? That a boy by the name of Sheltis fell into Eden? Or that he

didn't?"

".....So I'm not proof enough?"

The mateki residing within my body itself is proof. This body can't touch Ymy and takes damage from shinryoku arts. It is the most solid evidence that I fell into Eden.

—Clap, clap clap.

"Splendid. Yes, that's right. That was what I wanted to hear."

Igun-I's claps resounded throughout the deep green meadow.

"But Sheltis, try remembering a little harder? How did you fall into Eden? More specifically, what were you doing just before you fell into Eden?"

"I was.....asked that many times at the tower."

But I couldn't answer. I don't remember. I have no recollection of anything from just before I fell into Eden to when I returned to Orbie Clar.

"Yes, and that is where the key to this contradiction lies. The contradiction between your truth and that of Mikuva's Crimson Eye."

The wind blew through the grasslands. His pale blond hair swaying beneath his black hat, the Lord of Unusual Books spread both arms.

"Sheltis Magna Yehle—

You were not the one who should have fallen to Eden.

That you would fall into Eden is an event that lay outside the purview of this world."

He gently, oh so gently conveyed his words as if to a child of his own.

Those words crossed over the plains, over the nature district, over

Orbie Clar and permeated to the ends of the world.

## Part 4

"....."

"What, did you see something strange? Was there a flying lizard or something?"

"Nope—"

Tsali said so teasingly and Eyriey shook her head then turned to look at the path they'd walked through.

"I was just thinking that it's been smooth sailing this whole way."

"Even though there were a bunch of a standalone mechanical soldiers?"

"Ah, that's not what I meant..... Umm, I just thought we might have barely missed them."

There were turns but it didn't branch off. She felt as if she'd walked a fair distance but they had yet to meet Sheltis or anybody else she knew.

"C'mon, there was a single branch. It split off to the left and right and there was a large, fallen mechanical soldier off to the right side."

"Ahh, that was a long while ago."

"Yeahhh..... I wonder if it would've been better to pick the left route at that time. Right was out because that lug was clogging it up and it would be hard to pass by. What to to do?"

They hadn't met up despite having traveled this far. Even if there was a room ahead of this, she felt that the chances of everybody being there were low.

"I am Eyriey-nee's escort. I'll go with you where you want to

go."

Tsali gave her okay with her hand on Eyriey's head.

"But we're strapped for time. If we're turning back, you need to make the call fast."

"Hmmmm, then let's turn—"

Just before she was about to grab Tsali's hand and change directions.

*'Ahh! Onee-chan, wait, wait!'*

*'You came all this way so come play. We've been waiting all this time.....'*

"Heh?"

Two voices echoed directly within her head like music played through earphones. These innocent, youthful voices.....whose are they?

*'It's just a little further so keep going!'*

*'Just go ten meters more and turn the corner!'*

Hrm, what to do.

It's not Sheltis' group so I could just ignore them. But they might know where to go. And they've gone to the trouble of asking me to 'come' so I don't really want to refuse.

"Alright, I'll go, I'll go. So Tsali-san, they said it's just around that corner."

"So you're changing plans again from heading back."

She took the hand of her escort who was wearing a forced smile and started walking. Just like the twins', or so it seemed, voices said, there was certainly a corner just ahead of them. She could also see a slightly strong light coming from there.

.....Ummm, they said we just had to turn and head straight.

Gigantic double doors.

The crimson metal door gave off a strange pressure just by looking up at it.

".....What a large door. And it's closed."

"Now, now, little twins, I could force it open but what would you have me do?"

Tsali had one eye closed and looked to be enjoying herself.

*'Ahh, no violence. That's no good.'*

*'Yeah, that's no good. We'll open it now so just wait a second.'*

They waited several seconds.

The face of the crimson door was became bathed in glittering particles of blue and green.

"Ohhh, how pretty."

"The blue is barrier type shinryoku and the green is territory type. By the way, the red for the door might be reminiscent of baptism types. All three of them are essential in battles against Yuugenshu."

Tsuli said so while combing the hair next to her ear.

Then—

*'Welcome, onee-chan, onee-san.'*

*'To our base, the base of The Lords of Unusual Books. We shall guide you two.'*

An enormous lab lay on the other side of the open door.

A pair of twins submersed in solution within water tanks were there.

*'I am Neue. I'm in the blue water tank and I'm Noesis' younger brother.'*

*'I am Noesis. I'm in the green water tank and I'm Neue's older sister.'*

Each of the twins had their eyes shut within the water tanks. Their hair colors.....couldn't be ascertained because of the solutions' colors but they were slightly taller than Yuto. They looked to be about ten years old.

"Ohh, so polite. My name is Eyriey and the tall lady behind me is Tsali-san."

*'We know. Tsali-san was calling you Eyri-nee.'*

*'Eyri-nee. Yup, it's a good name. Can I call you that too?'*

"Sure, sure..... What's wrong, Tsali-san?"

She looked to her side and saw Tsali-san seemingly puffing her cheeks.

".....It's nothing. I'm not pouting at all."

"Okay?"

".....Really..... The only one allowed to call Eyri-nee by Eyri-nee is.....Yuto only....."

"Tsali-san, did you say something?"

"No, more importantly—"

The person in question cleared her throat as if nothing had happened.

"Eyri-nee, didn't you have something to ask these two?"

"Ah, right, right! Hey, hey, I'm looking for somebody called

Sheltis and wanted to ask if you know anything? I think he should be somewhere in this facility."

*'Sheltis. Ahh, the boy that Igun-I really likes. Hrmm..... He might not be in this base. I think he might have left Lagoon.'*

*'Yeah, he left. I think he's returned to Orbie Clar.'*

"Orbie Clar..... Wait, Orbie Clar?"

The continent with Sophia towering over it came to mind and Eyriey



tilted her head in wonder.

It took several hours by airship so just when did he go?

"And wait, you mean Sheltis just went back ahead of us on his own?"

*'Nope, Igun-I went with him.'*

*'Yeah, he went with him. He said he wanted to speak with him*

*alone so I think Igun-I used some weird art to move to Orbie Clar.*

*Also, Armadel is missing.'*

*'Eyri-nee, do you know a man called Leon? That person is also missing from this base.'*

".....Ugh, what's with that!"

She screamed out before thinking. Even though she'd worked up the courage and come out here, neither Sheltis nor Leon were here so there was no point.

"Wait a second, wait a second, lemme confirm. I don't know how but Sheltis and Leon went back to Orbie Clar. The ones still here at Lagoon are me, Tsali-san, Yuto and....."

*'Two officials from the Governmental Sector and a lady with a blindfold.'*

*'Also, a spear-wielding lady showed up sometime.'*

"Hm-hm. A spear-wielding lady..... I don't know who that is but okay. Hey, Tsali-san, what should we do?"

"Wouldn't it be a good time to pull back?"

The woman seemed indifferent as she looked over the room.

"I've already confirmed Shel-nii isn't here in Lagoon just like those twins said."

"Shel-nii?"

".....My mistake. ....Ahem. But before we return, I'd like to ask a few things first. There's no way you're trying to live in seclusion by building this cave-like facility out in the middle of

nowhere, right?"

Tsali briskly walked up to the twins' water tanks.

"It's that '*Layered World Project*' of yours."

*'Arere? So you know about that. Then maybe we can talk about it.'*

*'Yeah, I think it's fine. It's only restricted for people from*

*Sophia or the Governmental Sector. Eyri-nee doesn't seem to be from either and Tsali-san looks like she already knows.'*

Layered World Project.

What is this thing I've never heard of?

*'Look, Neue, Eyri-nee's confused.'*

*'Yeah, she's confused. —Then before we explain, look over here.*

*It's the all-important first reveal of our country. This is a special just for you, okay?'*

Kusukusu, kusukusukusu.....

The twins' voices echoed together with the sound of bubbles

popping. Immediately afterwards, the imposing sound of a machine starting up resounded throughout the area.

"The wall is!?"

The wall just behind the twins' water tanks began to sink into the floor and the space behind it slowly came into view.

"Eyri-nee, you should back up a little. It might be too much of a shock if you're this close."

"What do you mean?"

Her hand was grabbed by her escort and she was dragged right up to the wall. During that time, the wall continued to descend and a dimly lit room came into view. A single small water tank was in there all by its lonesome.

*'This is the beginning of the '*Layered World Project*'.'*

*'The beginning and the most important component.'*

The light reached into that dim space. When the

contents of the water tank were lit up—

"!.....Th.....That....."

She scraped out her voice but no words would form. She was seeing

it from a distance but that dark purple beast.....

The third water tank that had appeared.

Eyriey was speechless as she was faced with that water tank which

was cultivating a Yuugenshu.

## Part 5

"You are not the one who should have fallen to Eden. You are not the qualified person that Eden seeks."

".....I don't get what you mean."

"I expected you to say that so I have also prepared a different explanation."

Meticulously stretching his glove to remove the wrinkles, Igun-I pointed down at his feet.

"Eden — At times, there are people that fall down there by accident but the incident I speak of is not so. They are a qualified individual which was chosen by Eden and beckoned."

"Qualified individual?"

"Yes, I believe you have heard of this before. The activation of *'Mikuva's Crimson Eye'* also used the term. In this case, it's Eden..... To be more precise, it's the entity that sleeps deep within Eden who has chosen."

One short pause.

After a fractional period which was not enough time for neither a breath nor reverberation of his words, Igun-I continued.

"The person chosen by the Forbidden Crystal."

"! That.....?"

"Yes. I don't plan to speak in detail of the Forbidden Crystal here but if I had to summarize, it's like the core of Hyouketsu Kyoukai. It delved into the depths of Eden itself and sealed Eden. You can think of the Forbidden Crystal as such."

.....So I wasn't mistaken.

In the underground facility he'd gone to with Leon, there was an

image of a girl. That girl which had talked to him was—  
"Wait..... So you're saying the Forbidden Crystal.....beckoned  
somebody?"

The person summoned by the Forbidden Crystal would fall to Eden.

But he who had fallen to Eden was not the correct person?  
"Do you want to know who is the correct person?"

".....Not if you're not planning to say."

"Fufu, I'm joking. I just wanted to tease you."

Childishness that was short of being malice. With childish speech  
that betrayed no ill will, the Lord of Unusual Books  
continued.

"The qualified person's name is Ymy Ele Soufflenictole."

"—Wha!?"

"That's right. She is the qualified person chosen by the Forbidden  
Crystal. As the successor to the previous qualified person of one  
thousand years ago, Shasa Endens Lin Kale, she should have received  
the power of the Forbidden Crystal. But that requires her to come  
into direct contact with the Forbidden Crystal. As such, she would  
have to fall once into Eden where it awaits."

"....."

"It looks like you can't believe it."

"It would be stranger to. If Ymy is the qualified person, then she  
should have fallen into Eden by now, right?"

"Yes, that's right. ....Sheltis, you really have forgotten  
everything."

Igun-I's lonely, sad whisper was penetrating.

"Sheltis, remember.

Three years ago, you were an Elite Guard and you fell into Eden  
instead of Ymy when you protected her."

—Crack.

In that instant, something deep within his chest gave off a sound and cracked.

"Three years ago.....the girl, who was an apprentice Priestess, arrived at a '*certain place*' and should have fallen as ordained by the Forbidden Crystal. She would contact the Forbidden Crystal, house its power and once again rise back to Orbie Clar."

"....."

"The girl began to fall. Everything was as the Forbidden Crystal had planned.

However.....this is when something that was not intended occurred.

While the girl had gone to this '*certain place*', a boy had stealthily followed her. It was her childhood friend who was worried about the girl."

Those were distant, forgotten memories.

But little by little.....just like the snow covering the land

melts away, the events of '*that time*' returned as images in a flashback.

"She would fall to Eden and contact the Forbidden Crystal — but there was no way the childhood friend would know this truth which not even the girl herself knew. The girl falling to Eden looked no different than the other common incidents of falling into Eden. The next action the boy took..... I believe it need not be said."

The boy threw himself into Eden to save the girl who was falling.

".....And you're saying that was Ymy and me?"

Igun-I didn't answer.

But the lonely smile upon his lips spoke of the truth more clearly than any answer.

"The boy who jumped into Eden was assaulted by mateki but even then took the girl's hand..... In the end, he succeeded in her rescue and sent her 'up'. But the boy had no strength for his own return remaining. That is the truth of three years ago which no one remembers."

The girl remained on Orbie Clar.

The boy who had exhausted his strength fell to Eden.

"In the Sacred Hall of the Governmental Sector, I said this to you.

Mikuva's Crimson Eye is a replica of the original, the Forbidden Crystal. All that Mikuva's Crimson Eye records is also committed to memory by the Forbidden Crystal. However, because it is a replica, even if it an record events in this world, it cannot record those within Eden. With that as the case, do you understand?"

**[T/N: Sacred Hall used to be Holy Hall but that sounds bad.]**

"The event of '*Ymy Ele Soufflenictole fell to*

*Eden'* that the Forbidden Crystal ordained was eliminated and the event that should not have happened of '*Sheltis Magna Yehle fell to Eden'* occurred."

The Forbidden Crystal which lay in the deepest part of Eden saw the falling boy and perceived that event. On the other hand, Mikuva's Crimson Eye which was fixated in the Governmental Sector could not record that.

"The world's memory was distorted. Unaffected by the boy who fell

to Eden's existence, Mikuva's Crimson Eye which records the events of this world had no way to know. To be rid of this contradiction, the Forbidden Crystal came up with a plan."

"A plan....."

"It would make the '*Crimson Eye*' record a fabricated story where '*Sheltis Magna Yehle fell off the edge of Orbie Clar and into Eden while patrolling the Biotope*' and pass that off as the truth of the world."

"—! That..... That's a fabrication?"

That was what Ymy, Leon and even Sheltis himself remembered. He had fallen to Eden while patrolling the Biotope — everybody should remember it as such.

.....I can't believe it.

.....Though I.....really have nothing but muddled memories myself.

"But that isn't really necessary, right!? It would be fine if it just let Mikuva's Crimson Eye record that I had fallen into Eden!"

"That's the natural doubt to have. And of course, there was a reason the Forbidden Crystal would spread false information to the world through Mikuva's Crimson Eye."

Hand pressed down on the rim of his hat, Igun-I's words held no unevenness.

"It was the place. I used the vague description of a '*certain place*' just now to describe where the two childhood friends went. In other words, the place you fell into Eden from is the issue."

".....So you're saying it wasn't the Biotope?"

"Where do you think it was?"



If his falling into Eden from the Biotope was not the truth, then that would mean the place being Biotope was the falsity. But nothing readily came to mind. Maybe someplace in Lagoon? "It's a place you know well. Come now, though you can't see it from here."

The pitch black Lord of Unusual Books pointed far into the distance.

Towards the living districts which were far from the nature districts.

"It was Sophia. You and Ymy fell to Eden from the top floor of that tower."

Those words had surpassed his understanding. ".....So.....Sophia?" "Now isn't that the face of speechlessness? If you don't understand, try to remember the top floor of the tower. What is the top floor of Sophia known as?"

The top floor of the tower was floor 291.

It was known as 'Paradise' and he had heard it was connected to the Queen and Priestesses' prayers for Hyouketsu Kyoukai.

"Do you know how many floors there are in Sophia?"

".....291. That's obvious."

"That's right. But isn't that strange? It's such an odd number to stop at. In creating a massive structure like Sophia, to make it easier to keep in mind the whole thing, it would be common sense to simplify everything to the extreme. For example.....yes, adding another nine floors to make it 300 would be good? It's a very clean number."

".....Where are you going with this hypothetical story?"

Everybody on Orbie Clar knew of the peculiarity of the tower's floor numbering. But complaining about that now was pointless.

"Ahh, right, right. If we're talking about having nine floors—"

Beneath his hat, his shapely lips curled up.

**"Eden happens to be exactly nine floors."**

".....!?"

Somewhere deep within his memories—

*'Welcome, you who have fallen to Eden and returned to Orbie Clar. The Paradise which has been frozen for a thousand years was awaiting you.'*

*'I just want to ask you one thing. How far into Eden did you fall? The fifth or sixth surface? Or did you hear 'that song' which flows within the deepest parts?'*

**[T/N: Unusual counter for floors. It uses "mirror surfaces", implying that the floors are being counted in the opposite order.]**

.....I remember the sound of falling rain.

.....There was a woman who held her hand out to me within my greyed-out vision.

"If you add together Sophia's 291 floors and Eden's 9, you get a clean 300 floors. Like this, you could say it was a tidy construction. If so, wouldn't it be natural to think they were set to be such in the first place?"

".....What are you trying to say?"

"It's a mirror. Sophia and Eden. Going further, Orbie Clar and Eden are mirror images on opposite sides of the mirror called Hyouketsu

Kyoukai."

The Lord of Unusual Books spread his arms widely and looked up at the heavens.

That posture looked as if he was trying to embrace the blue skies.

"Because it is a reflection, the highest becomes the lowest and the lowest becomes the highest — You understand now, right? Sophia's highest floor is Eden's deepest. Within the tower's 291st floor, 'Paradise', there exists an invisible door which connects to Eden.

And....."

".....Ymy and I fell to Eden from there."

"Yes. With this, you also understand why the prayers for Hyouketsu Kyoukai are done at the highest floor, correct? The Queen and Priestesses are constantly activating the barrier from the location closest to Eden. Activating a barrier from closer up is guaranteed to be more effective."

.....I didn't know.

No, nobody knew. Not the Elite Guards, nor the instructors and probably not even the Sennenshi. The art of Hyouketsu Kyoukai should be a secret of the utmost importance circulated only between the Queen and the Priestesses.

"Ahh, by the way, not even the Priestesses know of this. That the tower and Eden are connected."

".....So not even the Priestesses know."

"Only three people do. Only those who contacted the Forbidden Crystal a thousand years ago. Amongst them in one man and two women."

"Are you one of them?"

"No, I am no one that important. I am an exception."

The tone of Lord of Unusual Books changed as he said that.

Despite knowing things beyond the ordinary, he took no pride in it.

Instead, he seemed to be embarrassed of the fact as he tightened his lips together and readjusted his hat over his eyes.

"At any rate, you understand now, right?"

"So this is the reason the Forbidden Crystal operated Mikuva's Crimson Eye....."

"Yes. I suppose you could say it was panicked."

The top floor of the tower was connected to Eden and that's where Hyouketsu Kyoukai was established.

If the masses of Orbie Clar knew of this, it would cause a great stir, and that was still within acceptable limits. The problem was the Yuugenshu. If those monsters knew the secret of Hyouketsu Kyoukai, that might become the cause for another weakness in Hyouketsu Kyoukai.

"And so you fell into Eden without knowing the truth and only the result of your harboring mateki was left within the world."

Igun-I pointed his finger straight at Sheltis.

"That is also the reason you survived falling into Eden. In exchange of Ymy who should have received the Forbidden Crystal's power, you were granted the protection of the Forbidden Crystal which was for *'returning to Orbie Clar once more'*. But because you were not qualified, you could not be given the Forbidden Crystal's power and it took time for you to rise back up to Orbie Clar."

That was the one year.

.....And that's why I have no memory of my time in Eden.

While he was in Eden, he remained outside the purview of Mikuva's Crimson Eye. Because of the efforts of the Forbidden Crystal,

placeholder memories of him *'falling from the Biotope'* hid

it.

"How about it?"

".....I still don't know which to believe."

But I know. This Lord of Unusual Books is not lying. I can feel

that everything he has said is the truth.

"But I think that you.....are not lying."

"Then that's good."

He smiled and then.

"Rather than not knowing anything, I would rather you despair after

knowing everything."

The pitch black Lord of Unusual Books declared with wholehearted

joy.

".....!"

"Whoa now, don't be in such a panic. Everything I have explained is

the truth. There are no embellishments to it."

Igun-I raised a hand to stop his reflexive tensing.

"I.....didn't believe that you would just explain this for no

reason. Say it already! What's your purpose?"

Even after hearing all he'd said until now, he still did not have a

grasp on Igun-I's objective.

Is it a diversion or is he buying time? But I don't see a point to

buying time at the edge of a grasslands like this. Even if this was

a distraction, he's being too honest.

"You will understand eventually. Yes..... It's almost time.....

You will understand soon."

The Lord of Unusual Books draw his swords out from the ground. Not

a fleck of earth was stuck onto those needle-like swords.

"Now then, let us enjoy our alone time for a while

longer."

## Part 6

Bright lights shone down from above in the room.

A multitude of cables snaked along the ground haphazardly and connected into varying sizes of machines which were painted all black.

But she wasn't concerned about any of that—

*'Aha, Eyri-nee, are you surprised? But that's natural.'*

*'Yeah, yeah, it's natural. If a normal person sees a Yuugenshu, they get surprised.'*

"—H-hey! I'm not surprised at all!"

Eyriey shouted out without thinking and took a step back. She clutched onto Tsali's clothing beside her and timidly leered at the interior of the water tank.

"H-hey, Tsali-san. Is..... Is that a Yuugenshu?"

"That's right."

She nodded as that's what it was. There was not a shred of unease in her.

.....I guess a Yuugenshu's nothing to her since she's a

Guard.

.....I'm just not comfortable with Yuugenshu and only them. I have nothing but scary memories of them.

It was the same thing when she went on that barbecue with Sheltis and Yuto and when Sophia came under attack by a large group of them. For she who could not use shinryoku, there was almost nothing she could do to resist them. Most of the people on Orbie Clar were the same and even within the tower, only the Guards and Priestesses were exceptions.

"Eyri-nee, are you scared?"

".....Yeah. Only Yuugenshu do this. I don't know when it might attack after all."

"That's the correct thinking. But that concern doesn't seem to be warranted this time."

"Eh?"

"There are two reasons the Yuugenshu before us is not to be feared. The first is that a single Yuugenshu or two aren't even enough to count as killing time against me, a simple matter of strength. The other is that there is practically no mateki coming from the water tank over there."

Narrowing her eyes to slits, Tsali glared at the water tank.

"Eyri-nee, what does that water tank look like to you?"

".....Isn't it a breeding tank? There are bubbles rising up from the bottom."

"That's right, there are similar apparatuses in Sophia as well..... I see, if you look at reality, it's immediately obvious."

Her eyes were smiling combatively in a way that clearly suited a grin.

**[T/N: It's actually an onomatopoeia for smiling (niyari) that we don't have an equivalent for in English. The SFX is suited to a smile that is not friendly by any stretch of the imagination.]**

"Breeding as a word is only partially correct. The goal does not appear to be breeding itself."

"Eh?"

"If they just stuck it in a water tank, the Yuugenshu would grow in size and spread mateki. But what about that? It doesn't have the mateki mist and it's not moving even a bit."

"That's true....."

Even if it was being bred in the water tank, it was unnaturally still. Its movements were stopped as if it was asleep.

"Their goal is an experimental barrier to seal away Yuugenshu through sleep. It looks like they're breeding Yuugenshu because that's a necessary step in their experiments."

'.....Uwah.'

'.....Wooow.'

Mixed into the twins' voices was awe at the sage before them.

"So this is the 'Layered World Project'?"

*'That's right. Our final goal is an eternal world.'*

*'Yeah, it's amazing. If this is completed, we won't need the*

*Queen or Priestesses. We can make Orbie Clar an eternal paradise in place of Hyouketsu Kyoukai. The 'will of the world' said so. If this barrier is completed, Orbie Clar will transform from a false paradise into a real one. We Lords of Unusual Books will end this illusionary paradise.'*

".....Illusionary paradise, huh."

Closing her eyes, Tsali ruminated over the twins' words.

"But that could also be considered to not be much of a difference to Hyouketsu Kyoukai. Isn't it just a difference of whether the

Priestesses are maintaining the barrier or you two?"

*'Hyouketsu Kyoukai won't hold much longer.'*

*'Yeah, it's at its limit. The Forbidden Crystal's power is*

*basically used up. Ymy Ele Soufflenictole who should have been the final qualified person also didn't fall into Eden and failed to contact the Forbidden Crystal, extinguishing the final hope.'*

.....Ymy?



"Eh? W-wait a second. What's this about Ymy falling into Eden —  
mnggh!?"

"I see, I've got the gist of it."

She tried to say something but had her mouth covered by the Guard  
beside her.

"Eyri-nee, let's head back."

"Fuguu!?"

"I've already asked all I wanted to. And it seems there are Lords  
of Unusual Books heading towards our airship."

*'Ah, she found out.'*

*'She found out—'*

Kusukusu. Innocent malice could be felt in their telepathic  
communications.

"Your older sister here will teach you kids something."

With her back towards the twins, Tsali turned just her head to face  
them sideways.

"Shasa's..... No, the Queen's strength is not in Hyouketsu Kyoukai  
nor the Forbidden Crystal. It is the unwavering '*will of the  
people*' that has persisted a thousand years. A true paradise is  
not a place, it is the succession of that will."

*'? Neue doesn't understand.'*

*'? Noesis doesn't understand.'*

She returned a slight smile to the twins floating in their water  
tanks—

Immediately after.

Tsali picked Eyriey up and disappeared from the room.

## Part 7

The murderous heat rays poured down mercilessly upon the sandy soil.

When there was no wind, the temperature would even get up to fifty degrees. Long periods of training in such an environment presented an extreme burden on both the body and mind. For Cadet Guards, even in independent training, it was an ironclad rule to be in a group of two or more.

"Even then.....why do I gotta pair with you?"

"Sheltis is not here. Monica said she would go buy the squad's emergency rations. I think she'll be back soon."

Vaiel continued his squats and Kagura was riding his shoulders as she looked down at him.

"You don't like being together with me?"

"Always the same shit..... Oww! Bitch, don't go slappin' my head!"

"Come on, focus. But I'm insufficient as a weight. We need a Guard with a little more body weight."

She looked around with her helmet on her head.

It was easy to see around her because she was on his shoulders but because it was the hottest time of day, it looked like all the other groups had taken cover in the shade beneath the trees.

"You think I'm gonna carry some damned fat ass in this damned heat? Hey, how much more?"

"Another nineteen times. After that appears to be conquering a full marathon while handstanding."

".....What kind of joke is that?"

"It looks like it's one of the new menus that Instructor Yumelda came up with by staying up all night. It appears to have come into effect yesterday but there have unfortunately been no successes thus far."

"\_\_"

He just silently continued his squats. From his exasperated expression, he seemed to have lost the will to respond.

"Still, how rare of you to participate in independent training of your own free will."

"It's 'cause our cap'n there's in strangely high spirits. Thanks to that, the Instructor comes to beat my ass if I'm dozing and tells me to come to training if I'm so free..... It's a crying tragedy."

"It's because Monica's also worked up."

.....Being excluded from the mission Sheltis is on must have been that hard on her.

The twin swords user that became Monica's impetus for becoming a Guard fell to Eden three years ago and was declared KIA. However, he had actually lived and that was Sheltis. The only one who knew that within the squad was Kagura.

.....Of course he resembles that Guard since he is that person.

Kagura was of course aware of the complicated feelings Monica held for Sheltis. But she couldn't tell her the truth. If she were to tell her, Monica would probably.....be happy but also receive a big shock.

"Somehow or other, that might be a cause for worry within our squad."

"You say something?"

"No, no, nothing at all. Rather than that, after this is—"

Another five times.

Just before Kagura said that.

*'Why are you—'*

*'I shall tell you everything. That which you want to know and*

*that which you do not, in its entirety, plain and simple. That is*

*why I am here.'*

This unusual phenomenon suddenly occurred at the

tower.

".....Eh?"

Was that my imagination? A voice I know just came from the tower's

speakers—

*'Do you remember this place?'*

*'.....It resembles the place 'Golden' Maha was protecting that*

*water tank with a Yuugenshu in it.'*

*'It is exactly the place you fought at with*

*Maha-san save for one thing. Look over there. Only the area over*

*there has the grass torn up and the ground beneath exposed,*

*right?'*

Maha? A water tank with a Yuugenshu in it?

What's going on? Why can I hear Sheltis' voice from the tower's

speakers..... And who is he speaking with?

"Oi, oi, that bastard's back at the tower?"

Vaiel also raised his head while wiping off his sweat.

There was no mistake that he was also hearing this. This voice was

Sheltis' and it was coming from the tower's speakers.

"I wonder who he's talking to."

That was what she was curious about. Considering that Maha's name had come up, it was somebody related to the Lords of Unusual Books. The person Sheltis was talking to should not be some random civilian.

*'Did you think Yuugenshu were prevalent throughout the entire world? That's not the case. Even within Eden, there are places in which Yuugenshu do not exist.'*  
*'.....I don't believe you.'*

—What is this tone of Sheltis'?

He was showing anger far removed from his normal self in his words..... No, is this impatience? A feeling of unease with strong intonation. This isn't the kind of feeling you'd give off if you were talking to an ally. It's highly likely that he's talking to an enemy from the place he was infiltrating.

During this time, the conversation between the two continued to play through the speakers—

*'You should understand, having fallen into Eden.'*  
*'.....So it really was you.'*

*'Ahh, the message to the tower. It made it safely, I'm glad.'*

".....Mm. Eden? The message to the tower?"  
Vaiel scrunched his face in puzzlement and she looked at that reaction of his.

—So that's what this is!

Chills enough to make her shiver accompanied a single premonition that popped up in her head.

"Sheltis!"

There was no way her voice would reach through this one-way speaker. Even though she knew that, Kagura ran towards the speaker.

.....This is bad, I have to stop him!

.....I already understand what's going on from what was said just now. This is—

"Sheltis, you can't! You can't say anymore than that!"

"What is it, Kagura? Shouting like that and even going so far as to take off your helmet."

".....Monica."

She had probably intended to bring refreshments. With two bottles of drinks in her hands, she came right up to Kagura — that is, she came right up to the speaker.

.....This is bad!

.....Only Monica.....must not hear this.

"Monica, you've come at a good time. I have something to do so come with me!"

"Wha? O-oi, what is it?"

She pushed her back and tried to open up whatever distance she could from the speaker.

*'Why..... Why use such underhanded tricks?'*

*'Don't hold back, I'm sure you have something you want to know more than that. Let's see, for example.....'Why do you know that I fell into Eden!?'.'*

".....Sheltis? .....Eden.....?"

Monica's back was trembling slightly. Kagura could not come up with words for her before the continuation brought yet more despair.

*'Sheltis, remember.'*

*'Three years ago, you were an Elite Guard and you fell into Eden  
instead of Ymy when you protected her.'*

The speaker's voice quietly, quietly yet rejecting all  
interference, spread through the tower.  
What started as a small commotion grew larger with every passing  
moment.

## Part 8

—Shing!

The beautiful reverberation of a sword. Before that sound finished, another one rang out and the cascading resonance became an odd sort of song.

"Kuh.....!"

"Whoopsie, that was close."

Igun-I dodged just before Sheltis' sword tore through the tip of his hat. The backhand blow he delivered to Igun-I's landing point was also stopped and instead, he barely managed to defend against the down-up sweep from his side.

"Your breathing is getting quicker. Is it fatigue or perhaps impatience?"

"....."

He paid no attention to those words and launched a kick at Igun-I's chin below him.

Tchch — a sharp sound could be heard but his boot only managed to slightly sway some of his opponent's blond hair. As if his action had been read, he was dodged by a hair's breadth.

"Ohh, close again."

My attacks aren't landing.

.....What's going on? Why does it feel like something doesn't add up?

"\_\_"

He didn't understand Igun-I's degree of skill.

He could reproduce Sheltis' sword skills from three years ago, just before he had fallen to Eden. He really did have a sense of having



seen each and every one of these movements with their tendencies and the combinations of them. That's why it was a given that he would also be able to avoid Igun-I's attacks.

.....But why am I not able to land my own attacks?

Now that he had grown taller and gained more muscle, his swordplay had changed forms from the core. There should be no way Igun-I would be able to read his attacks by replicating him from three years ago.

"I'm happy."

The Lord of Unusual Books had perfectly level breathing and whispered in a tone overcome with emotion.

"You understand deep within your heart. Who I am."

".....I understand who you are?"

"Yes. You are subconsciously making your attacks miss. That is the reason your attacks aren't landing."

Putting a hand to his chest, Igun-I continued.

"For I am the most important person to you."

".....What did you say!"

"It's true, you know? Since you **don't know what I look like beneath my hat.**"

He pinched the corner of his hat between his fingertips.

"But you can't look. I won't show you yet. Figuring out who I am will have to wait until everything is over."

"—Jokes should be kept in moderation!"

"Ohh, close again."

He swung down from overhead and his opponent swung up while backing up. But even though he had pretty much perfectly directed his attention above, the combined attack from below didn't hit.

.....I'm making my attacks miss subconsciously?

.....That shouldn't.....be the case.

"Who you are is of no concern to me."

"Why would that be?"

".....I made a promise to somebody."

"That would be Ymy Ele Soufflenictole?"

He didn't feel any surprise at his promise with Ymy being known.

For somebody who knew truths that neither Ymy nor he knew despite being those involved, he was prepared for anything to be known.

"I also feel that it is a beautiful thing."

The smile upon his lips had disappeared at some point and the Lord of Unusual Books' tone was serious as he said that.

"Ymy would become a Priestess protecting Orbie Clar and you would protect her from Yuugenshu. You would go on to become a Sennenshi and protect her. That was the promise."

"And what of it?"

"Fufu."

It was a lively voice which even gave off the impression of deep affection.

"Ahh, how rude of me. I just thought you really do treasure her.

I'm sure you treasure others as well but she alone is special."

".....She's just a childhood friend."

"You don't have to be embarrassed. I think that simplicity of yours is good. That's why....."

Igun-I took something out of his pocket.

"I will destroy all those precious relationships around you."

A black box. Red and green lamps flashed consecutively.

"!?"

"It's nothing dangerous so be at ease. It's just a listening

device. But I don't need this anymore. It has already been more than helpful."

Igun-I threw the device into the air and split it into two perfect halves.

".....A listening device."

"Yes. You didn't realize that none of the conversation from just now was focused around me?"

Igun-I pointed his index finger at the heavens.

"I've taken the liberty of extracting only the convenient parts of our conversation and broadcasting it. Now here's the question: where did I broadcast it to?"

".....You're kidding."

Cold sweat flowed down his face and onto the ground.

Considering Igun-I's mail that was sent several days ago to every corner of the tower, it was a foregone conclusion. As much as he thought, the worst answer was—

"I've forcefully broadcasted our conversation just now to every floor of the tower."

Igun-I's shoulders shook as he laughed innocently.

"Arara, how terrible. It looks like your past, your relationship with Ymy and every secret you wished to keep hidden has been exposed to everybody?"

## Part 9

*'Sheltis, remember.'*

*'Three years ago, you were an Elite Guard and you fell into Eden  
instead of Ymy when you protected her.'*

Sophia floor 33, the Regular Guard training floor.

"....."

Leaving the four iron balls she was controlling stalled in the air,

I'sa Ish Ismael wordlessly listened to the voices coming from the  
speaker.

".....An Elite Guard."

The bald dual gunner that came up to her only muttered that single  
phrase.

"So that's why his ability was beyond a Cadet Guard."

".....Hey, Jin."

Her face remained downcast as I'sa unconsciously clenched her  
fists.

"Do you think onee-sama.....knew about this?"

"Who knows. But she's also an Elite Guard so I don't think you can  
say she didn't know for sure."

".....Right."

She bit down on the inside of her cheek.

—That dual swordsman is an Elite Guard? And the childhood friend  
of Ymy-sama?

.....No, more importantly.....he fell into Eden?

.....So a person who fell into Eden has come back to Orbie

Clar.

"What should we do?"

"We won't do anything. We just wait for orders from above."

She recalled her iron balls back to her side.

"This will cause a stir."

"It won't be something so minor. Somebody that returned from Eden is here in the tower. There's no way the division chiefs will leave this alone."

I'sa looked unblinkingly at the roof of the floor and gnashed her molars.

".....This flame will grow."

## Part 10

*'.....What are you trying to say?'*

*'It's a mirror. Sophia and Eden. Going further, Orbie Clar and*

*Eden are mirror images on opposite sides of the mirror called*

*Hyouketsu Kyoukai.'*

Sophia ground floor.

A black-haired male Cadet Guard was sitting at the edge of a

fountain located in the lobby with his eyes shut.

"Nash, did you hear that just now!?"

"Don't be so loud, Myun-fa. I couldn't ignore it if I wanted to."

The boy that was called — Nash G. Endolfin opened one eye.

"Myun-fa, you entered the tower as an apprentice Priestess."

"I'm part of the group that quit and ran away after one year

though. I know what you're trying to say though."

With her zither tucked under her arm, the shinryoku caster sighed as if telling him to look.

".....There's no way I'd know. The top floor of the tower is

connected to Eden? I've never heard of something that scary. The

apprentice Priestesses won't know and I guess it's just Priestesses

that would be informed?"

"In any case, there's no need to let the underlings know, huh."

"Are you angry?"

"No. It's just that I don't like things becoming a bother."

He quickly looked over the lobby which was in an uproar and his face warped into a bitter expression.

"Even the civilians that came to the tower have heard it. It won't even take a day for this to circulate throughout Orbie Clar as a rumor..... The truth they were hiding was just too big."

"Will Orbie Clar fall into chaos?"

"This will also draw in the Governmental Sector. It'll be world-scale mayhem."

## Part 11

Sophia floor 287.

"Ran, where are you!? Please, if you can hear me—"

"I hear you, Ymy. I'm here so don't worry."

The door opened sideways and a tanned tomboy quickly walked to her.

"Oh my, you moved fast. As expected of you, Ran."

"Not like I have a choice after hearing that broadcast just now.

It's been a while since I ran up five floors using the emergency stairs."

Even though she shrugged her shoulders in a joking way, her tone was serious as usual.

"So that really is the case."

"Yeah, my subordinates and I also heard it. It'd be fine to say that every floor of the tower heard that conversation just now."

Ran replied in the affirmative to Meimel who walked over.

".....No.....way."

The strength drained out of her waist and Ymy used the chair near her as a crutch as she struggled her way over.

.....For this kind of thing..... Who did it and for what reason.....

My being childhood friends with Sheltis is fine to be publicized.

But for his past of having fallen to Eden to come out is the worst.

To begin with, the general populace will be stricken with worry.

The division chiefs of the tower's upper management wouldn't let



that slide.

.....This time, Sheltis will be outed from the tower for sure.

.....No, that much would be fine. Depending on what happens, he might be unable to go to the living districts and be eternally confined in a facility.

"Meimel, what about that talk about Eden?"

"The thing about the top floor of the tower being connected to Eden? Hrmmm. Come to think of it, I might have heard something about it from Salah-sama. I don't know whose voice that was in the broadcast but they're trying to force their side of the truth without any confirmation."

"Got it, that side will be settled if the Priestesses publicize their opinion. ....So the problem is with the Guards."

Ran furrowed her brow.

"First of all, the Elite Guards will be doubtful that Sheltis was an Elite Guard. They're still leaders so they won't cause a ruckus but there won't be any shortage of people wanting to confirm the truth. Also, there are the Cadet Guards. There are many of them and it looks like there are those agitated that are kicking up a fuss. It's that mail that said there's a Yuugenshu in human form lurking here. They're saying that he's the Guard carrying mateki."

"Hrmm..... It's true that the matter isn't unrelated to them as Cadet Guards. A Cadet Guard that was training with them until just yesterday actually fell into Eden and is housing mateki."

Meimel put a hand to her cheek and sighed.

"The ones we should be concerned about are the Cadet Guards that were close to him. Aren't we infected with mateki because we were

with him — They might be thinking something like that. That would spread anxiety in a flash and cause a big panic."

".....Ah....."

".....Ymy?"

Syun-rei feebly stood up from the sofa.

".....That's.....right....."

.....I had planned to forget about it until this mission was over.

I remembered because of Meimel's words just now. My worries that would still be here after this mission ended. I'd put it out of mind because it might have been a hindrance to the mission.

*'It looks like I've fallen in love with him.'*

.....If Monica-senpai heard that broadcast just now.

Senpai would also be shocked if she suddenly heard that..... No, it might not end with just that. She would definitely be shocked.

".....That wasn't.....what I wanted——"

That wasn't why she had hid her relationship as childhood friends with Sheltis either. She had intended to take her time and consider the time and place to discuss it.

.....I listened to Monica-senpai's worries so I was really worried about her.

.....But what do I do? How do I explain this to her?

Senpai will also be uneasy in this situation. This is the worst possible way she could have learned about Sheltis.

".....Why did it.....come to this."

Ymy lost the strength to even hold onto the chair back and collapsed to her knees.

"That makes everything."

The Lord of Unusual Books watched the divided listening device fall to the ground.

"With this, I have taken away everything."



".....Igun-I."

He had his fists clenched tight enough to draw blood.

.....No, hold it in.

.....He's provoking me. I can't give in to anger and just scream.

"Oya, that's unexpected? I thought for sure that you'd be indignant."

"What..... What is your goal?"

"To interfere."

Igun-I's answer was a single phrase.

"My goal is to interfere with all those people hanging around you. I'd like to cut them all away cleanly. If I do, then you'll be alone. You'll be really, really sad, right?"

"Do you have some kind of grudge against me....."

Even now, Igun-I's identity was unknown. But he had no idea who he could have angered so badly no matter how much he thought back.

"No way, it's the opposite."

With his hand on his hat, Igun-I shook his head.

"If you become alone, then I'll be the only one that would extend their hand to you, right? I will be able to become everything to you. That's why."

".....You're insane."

"You will come to understand. When you come to know of 'the other half of the truth reflected in the mirror'. You will be able to accept me when you know the entirety of the truth from three years ago."

Igun-I gave a courteous bow and turned his back to Sheltis.

"Sheltis, you have heard only half of the truth. Let us meet once more when you have heard it all."

"—Do you think I'll let you get away?"

"Rather than worrying about other people, you should worry about yourself."

Stab. The raw impact of something cutting through flesh was conveyed not through sound but pain.

.....My leg?

"!?"

An enormous white snake was coiled around his knee with its

fangs buried into his thigh. Viscous and clear venom was dripping from those fangs.

"Good timing, Maha-san. It's just as we discussed."

Maha?

"Kuh.....uhh.....ah.....ah.....?"

The pain traveling from his thigh to his buttocks and from his buttocks to his back prevent his voice from coming out. Unable to stay standing, Sheltis collapsed on the grasslands.

.....I've seen this snake before..... It's the poisonous snake from Maha's Golden Hexahedral arts.

"It's a venom that destroys muscles and organs at the cellular level, causing hemorrhaging. It's a deadly poison so I think you won't be able to breathe for a while from the pain."

The Lord of Unusual Books looked over at him with a graceful smile.

"Maha-san, after you're done, meet up with Armadel-san at the aforementioned spot. I'll also head over as soon as I'm done at Sophia."

".....h.....i....."

"You want to know what I'm going to do at Sophia? I told you, there's *'the other half of the truth'*. In order to convey that to you, I'll just be taking one of the Priestesses."

".....!?"

"Ahh, I don't mean Ymy. It'll be the fourth Priestess, Syun-rei Pia Nucclene. Her territory arts will be a hindrance to my goal..... Ymy is last."

He announced his plans which should be critical without a care.

It's not like you can stop me, right? The challenging gaze from beneath his hat said as much.

"Well then, Sheltis, until the next time."

Igun-I raised his brimmed hat.

His pale blond hair swayed in the wind.....and the Lord of Unusual Books disappeared as if spirited away by that wind.

The only one remaining there was a single boy squirming on the ground with control over his body stolen away by deadly venom.

In the fields where only the whispering of the wind was



blowing.

"\_\_\_\_\_!"

Sheltis raised a voiceless scream.

# Epilogue - That Is Why The Boy Aims For the Tower

## Part 1

It was time for the clouds drifting overhead to be dyed madder red.

The edge of the sky that could be seen from a cliff face in Lagoon was coloring black and the swirling wind slowly became cooler.

"Horn-chaaan, you'll die if you sleep right now, okay?"

"The setting sun was just too bright."

Two of the rear seats in the airship's passenger room were connected to form a simple bed. Horn was laying down face up on that. ....Has it been.....five minutes since I closed my eyes?

"At any rate, it didn't hit any vital organs. It should be fine to sleep."

As long as it wasn't stitched, even if the bleeding stopped, there was a limit. She was dizzy from the slight amount of blood seeping out. She didn't want to have her eyes open very much.

"Ishtar will stitch you up. I'm really good at sewing, you know?"

".....I'll pass."

Horn stopped Ishtar who merrily brought out a sewing machine and looked at her own left shoulder. Her shoulder was wrapped in multiple layers of bandages. The shoulder shot by Beltoma — When she considered that her fingertips could move, she would be able to escape having her left hand paralyzed.

.....Beltoma.

.....I need to come up with a counter for him.

"Yoooo. You got rekt."

Suddenly the sunny voice of a man broke the silence.

The electronic door with a keycode opened and a man with a cowboy hat sluggishly entered the passenger room. Following behind him was his female subordinate.

".....I should have given you a damage report."

"Yupper. Reports are important. Thanks to that, I know more or less what our situation is. Right, Kuro?"

"We're in a similar circumstances."

The woman who answered as such was not in the suit from when they set off but instead wore a single light brown shirt. Huick who was the original owner of that shirt was wearing his jacket over his bare skin.

".....It went up in flames. I just bought that suit and it cost three months of my wages."

"Just consider yourself fortunate to have returned with all your limbs intact. Wheeew, it was close for us too. We almost got swallowed up in a wave of flames."

Now then — Huick sighed and gave the room a look-over.

"So this is everybody that's heading home."

"That's right. Sheltis and Leon seem to have already left Lagoon."

The cockpit door opened and Eyriey the pilot suddenly showed her face.

"Yooo, cap'n. Good to see you're all right."

".....You'll be shocked."

"Mm?"

Looking up at Huick who was waving at Eyriey, Horn slowly spat out her words.

"Most likely.....out of all of us, she is the one who got the furthest in the base."

"Hah? What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you about it when we're on auto-pilot. For now, let's get a-flying. C'mon, Yuto, sit over there and do up your seatbelt."

Eyriey nodded with a carefree expression on her face and closed the cockpit door again.

## Part 2

"Leon got done in one-sidedly. The number one great sword user on Orbie Clar."

The evening sun's light poured in through the passenger room window.

Lounging on the seats dyed bright red, Huick spat out in displeasure.

"Horn sis, you heard that from the Priestesses, right?"

"It was a telepathic communication from Ymy. There's a possibility it would leak to the enemy's shinryoku practitioners so she cut the link after giving fragmentary information."

"He fell into a waterfall basin and is MIA. ....How 'bout the other bro?"

He should be talking about Sheltis. Eyriey who was sitting in a corner of the passenger room reacted first and her eyes closed slightly in an expression of loneliness.

"From what Ishtar and Horn-chan heard, it seems bad for a different reason."

"A different reason. You mean other than combat-wise?"

"Yeah, yeah. Ymy-sama was repeatedly going  
'*Stop Sheltis!*'."

".....Did he fall into a trap?"

He crossed his legs the opposite way and put what came to mind to mouth.

"I dun really geddit, ya know. Those Lords of Unusual Books setting traps."

The number two, Natraja, and the number four, Beltoma.

The Lords of Unusual Books that had awaited them in the base were full of absolute confidence and came at them head-on. Even if they were to use a clever scheme, setting a trap should be beyond their personalities.

.....Does that mean it was just that bro's opponent that was special?



"There might have been some purpose to it."

"Well, hold on a sec, Kuro. Something to do with that bro? He's a Cadet Guard, not a Sennenshi or Priestess. He shouldn't have some kind of crazy information like that."

**"He does."**

Ishtar's words echoed through the passenger room.

"This is just what I think but.....putting aside whether he himself remembers, he probably holds two sets of information. The first concerns Ymy-sama and the other concerns Eden."

"Whazzat mean?"

"You'll find out if you just sniff around a little but he's Ymy-sama's childhood friend. As for Eden, this is his personal information so Ishtar can't speak about it all willy-nilly. If you want to know, you'll have to ask Meimel-sama."

"Knowing just that much is enough. So that bro has information that would be enough for the Lords of Unusual Books to fixate on him."

"Not that there's any point to thinking about it right now."

Kuro said that as she gazed out at the clouds as they flowed into different shapes.

"The Sennenshi Leon is MIA and we're in this state. I can't say this is the final conclusion but.....everybody was beaten back. This first battle is our complete and utter loss."

"It's fine. That's how first battles go."

Touching the charred rim of his hat, Huick showed a smile that was neither self-deprecating nor bitter.

"We've found out that the Lords of Unusual Books are a complete gathering of problematic people. Right now, we focus on information. We've more-or-less gotten info on each of the members so we'll leave figuring out their plans for the future. We have plenty of time."

".....Ah."

Suddenly, the girl who had only been listening until now lifted her head.

"What is it, cap'n?"

"What you said just now. I actually went into the Lords of Unusual Books' base and was told a bunch of different things."

"You mean what Horn-sama said. You were worried and went after us."

Kuro was half in admiration, half speechless.

"Yeah, yeah. Tsali-san acted as my escort and by just walking together, we ended up getting to Neue and Noisis' room."

".....I'm surprised you're okay. Rather, who is this Tsali and who are Neue and Noisis — Ahh, no, we'll save the details for later. All that matters is what you saw, missy."

He urged her on with his eyes and she absentmindedly stared at the ceiling.

"Kay then, I'm not really savvy on shinryoku or Sophia. That's why I didn't really understand like half of what they said but it was something important..... Umm, Neue and Noisis said something about a project near the end."

"—'Layered World Project'."

That was not Eyriey.

The source of the voice came from behind her. It was the young girl seated there with a smile on her face.

"In place of the Queen and the five Priestesses, they would separate Orbie Clar from Eden via a new barrier. The Lords of Unusual Books would put it into action but the details of who exactly would be casting it are unknown."

The young girl stated it without so much as hesitating.

"—Is what Eyri-nee told me just before this."

"Oyo? Izzat so?"

Eyriey turned around still with a carefree expression.

"Yeah, yeah, Eyri-nee told me."

"I see. Well, that's how it is so it looks like that's their plan."

".....The problem is their motive."

Speaking for everybody present, Huick spoke so he could hear himself.

"Putting up a barrier as a goal is fine. But what's their reason? I can't see them as a group looking to replace the Queen as Orbie Clar's protectors. In the first place, talking about barriers, it's normal to consider that Hyouketsu Kyoukai is still up and running."

"About that.....they said something a little scary."

There was a slight hesitance mixed into the liveliness of the girl's eyes.

Hesitation and wavering, fear and anxiety were mixed into her eyes which were looking at him fixedly.

"What is it? Run it past me."

"Kay then—"

And then Eyriey's words once again spread a frozen silence throughout the passenger room.

"The Queen's Hyouketsu Kyoukai.....is already at its limit. Because the Forbidden Crystal's power is all dried up."

## Part 3

That night.

The entirety of the floating continent Orbie Clar was being assaulted by an unusually torrential downpour.

—That rain was chilling.

Getting soaked just once by the rain made one feel a freezing pain right to the marrow. As if ice crystals were raining down in droplet form.....that was the kind of rain it was.

The tears of the heavens knocked leaves off in the sea of trees. The roar of water in the surroundings had surpassed being that of rain and was fitting for even a waterfall.

Just how much has continued to fall?

The pitch black overcast heavens showed no signs of abating despite having started several hours prior.

Plop.

The curtain of night fell over the grasslands and tiny little droplets had been born.

Beneath the roaring world, something was illuminated by starlight. A shadow crawled across the hills beneath the dim lighting.

—It was a single boy.

He was probably in his latter teens. His reddish brown hair which was close to purple reflected the light.

"  
.....  
Uu  
.....  
....."

Leaking out an anguished groan that wasn't quite a voice, the boy continued to crawl ahead in the chilling rain.

".....Hah



.....

.....haha....."

.....Come to think of it, this same thing happened a few years ago.

Forgotten memories.

It was the time he had returned from Eden. Amidst rain that fell like it was composed of earth and sand, with wounds all over his body such that he could not walk, he had crawled along the road.

.....It's the same as then.

Instead of wounds throughout his body, he was afflicted with a deadly venom that was sealing his body's freedom.

"

.....

Kuhhh....."

Despite being unable to even breathe because of the venom, the boy continued with some place as his destination.

He continued ahead in increments of a few centimeters at a time in his half-dead state.

"—!"

Just before his outstretched hand could grab hold of grass, the boy's head finally sunk into a puddle.

He couldn't move. His body heat was being sapped by the chilling rain and his body's freedom was stolen away by the venom eating away at his body.

.....Plop.

Another small ripple was formed in that dark field.

Within the faint starlight, the vague shadow of a person came into view.

"  
.....  
"

The fallen boy slightly raised his head at the sound of those footsteps.

In this frozen night, the figure wore form-fitting vestments such that her body's figure could be seen.

The feeble city lights were not enough for him to make out her face. However, the voluptuous and seductive lines of her body made it so even a child could figure out she was a woman.

"Sheltis."

Her cherry lips smiled gently and the woman looked up at the sky.

A young woman. She sounded to be in her early twenties or possibly middle-aged.

"Sheltis Magna Yehle, you..... How much of the truth have you learned?"

—A mysterious sight.

The chilling rain bounced off with a glitter just before it hit the woman's body.

It was as if an invisible wall of light stood between the rain and the woman.

"

.....

"

The boy looked up at the woman before him with unfocused eyes.

"Fu, so you don't even have the strength left to speak."

The woman held out a hand to the boy.

"—I don't need it."

The hand that was being held out came to a stop with those words.

"You don't need it?"

".....I don't want to take your help. Right now.....I want to.....walk by

myself."

If somebody were to see this, they would probably be shocked.

The boy who had his body heat sapped by the rain and was afflicted with poison should not have been able to move but, though shakily, he managed to get to his feet.

".....Tsali-san.....was it?"

"Hou?"

"I remember. ....For this alone, I will thank Igun-I."

The boy's face was downcast and his expression unreadable.

".....Thank you very much. You saved me that day."

One step.

Another step and the boy began to walk with firm steps.

"But I'm fine already. I.....already.....have found where I must go."

"Is it different from two years ago?"

".....It is."

"In this rain? With that body?"

"I am.....fine."

"I see."

Within the darkness, the woman called Tsali eased the corners of her lips.

"I get it, it looks like I was a bit uncouth just now. That's right. You have already met her again."

Her smile.

She had a gentle expression like a smile as if she was a mother welcoming her child back home.

"And that is why you aim for the tower."

"Yes."

.....I lost to Igun-I.

.....I was just a normal person that wasn't even supposed to fall into Eden.

He had been rejected by shinryoku, the power people held as a fact of the world.

He was even shunned from the destiny of succeeding the Forbidden Crystal's power.

.....

.....That's who I am.

.....

"But even so.....there is somewhere I wish to return."

'I'd like you to join the squad I form.'

'Ahh, what a relief. You've answered my question. With this, I can now promise on the pride of the Nells to respond to your trust.'

'Ain't no helpin' it..... So, yeah

.....

If I feel like it, I'll look after ya.'

The squad that had formed after he met Monica. He had been acknowledged by Kagura after the battle with Maha and become acquainted with Vaiei through participating in the mission to the Governmental Sector.

Three years ago, he had advanced all by his lonesome and lacked *'friends'*.

'Oh, it really is. Sheltis, it's been a while!'



'Shel-nii, do you hate that tower? Yuto likes it. It's all shiny and pretty.'

His friends he had met after being expelled from the tower which still followed him even now that he had gone back. It had been none other than Eyriey and Yuto who had supported him through the harshest of times.

'I told you, you and I aim for different peaks.'

'Hurry up and climb up here. I've got no competition without you.'

His old friends from before he fell to Eden.

Ishtar who did not choose the expected path of becoming a Sennenshi and his irreplaceable friend who had become a Sennenshi, Leon.

And.....

—This time for sure, I'm waiting for you to become my partner.

The Priestess who continues to offer prayers from the summit of the tower.

She..... She alone is the only person I don't want to leave alone. I don't want to have her experience the sadness of being kept waiting.

"Boy, that is a change you have brought upon yourself."

Covered with her transparent film of light, Tsali spread both arms.

"Before, you climbed the tower solely to become a Sennenshi. Now you climb the tower while thinking of your friends and to protect your promise with Ymy."

A reason to aim for the tower.

Not to gain, but to protect.

"It's difficult, you know? It's like a baby chick: catching it is easy but raising it is far more challenging."

".....I still.....have things left to do."

Eden's mateki and Eden Code.

Within the truth of three years ago he had learned of from Igun-I, there was not a single thing connected to those.

.....There are still secrets remaining.

.....'Something' that nobody has touched yet which is related to me. That will surely become the final hope against Eden and Igun-I.

It will become the key to fulfilling my promise with Ymy.



"As long as.....I don't give up, nothing will have ended."

Denied by destiny and the natural order of the world, the boy still continued to aim for the tower.

"This time for certain, I don't want to lose everything."

"—Two years."

Tsali suddenly turned to face the sky.

"I have been waiting for those words of yours for two years. As your observer. And as the one who watches over you who was powerless that day."

Her breath mixed white mist into the night air.

"But.....that too ends today. It's time for the chick to leave the nest."

Her breath was swept away by the wind.

She watched her white, glistening breath disperse into the night and—

"You don't have shinryoku like the Queen or Ymy. But, boy, shinryoku and the blessing of the Forbidden Crystal have no bearing on this. The strength of a person is that of the 'will' residing within you. A true paradise is not a place, it is the succession of that will."

".....A true paradise."

"Right. That possibility was entrusted to you by Shasa and then by Iris a thousand years ago. You will now succeed that by your own will."

Then.

Her eyes housed a glitter as Tsali watched Sheltis from behind.

"Three years ago. You fell into Eden instead of Ymy and that was no ending — prove to me that it will bring about a future where the Forbidden Crystal is liberated from Eden and 'The Promised Land <Tsalabel>' is brought about on Orbie Clar.

# Afterword

Blank Baptism. After a merciless ceremony that washes away everything, is it despair that's left behind or.....

Thank you for picking up this book. I'm Sazane Kei.

I just started writing 'Eden' not too long ago and it's already the seventh volume. The climax of Episode I finally came around with this volume and I wonder, did you all enjoy it?

A little bit of the full truth of the world has come out and who the fated enemies are is gradually becoming clear with this volume. Starting from Sheltis and Ymy, everybody around them has grown little by little in mind — following this, I'd like to strive such that Episode II will be even more heated.

## ◆ Recent Events

Just like I announced on my blog, I changed jobs in April of this year. I was with my previous job for about two years and it was somewhat lonesome leaving my place. It's been a while since I felt such loneliness like a school graduation. Now I'm anxiously awaiting whether I'll manage to pass a year in my new workplace.

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## ◆ Thanks

In a way, this will be the final 'thanks'.

Last month, my editor K-san who has supported me from my debut work up to 'Eden' has been replaced. After five years, the shock was big but with what I've learned up to now, in place of gratitude, I swear to work hard from now on as well.

From now on, I look forward to working with and ask for your support, my new editor S-san and Kasukabe Akira-san brings evermore beautiful colors to Eden.

## ◆ Next Volume Preview

Hey, Sheltis, you can feel it, right? The tragedy of being the sole heretic within the world.

Having come to know yourself and the natural order of the world, where do you

plan to go?

Sheltis has returned to Sophia.

But he is already too late and Sophia has been swallowed up by a vortex of chaos. Orbie Clar trembles in light of the truth Igun-I communicated. Bonds crumble away with a sound. In a tower filled with screams and suspense, will the boy's do-or-die cry be heard?

The story has reached a turning point and plunges into the second half. Let us meet again in September in 'Hyouketsu Kyoukai no Eden 8 Resonating Grief –Cruel Shout-'.  
(Maybe the titles will change a bit too with the changing of Episodes?)

2011 August, latter third Sazane Kei

Blog: <http://sazane.exblog.jp>